

Balraj Sahni

an autobiography

A revealing, intimate and delightful story of the life of a great actor. An insight into his life and into the world of films—the glamour, the romance, the secret lives and secret deals laid bare, as never before.

A highly sensitive and brutally frank inside account of the world of the film industry. The uneasy road to stardom, the torture and the glory of success and fame..

This is Balraj Sahni by Balraj Sahni, the man adored by millions.

Flash-back is an accepted technique of film-making. Unless, however, the viewers have first been made sufficiently familiar with the events that happen in the ‘present’ of the film, no flash-back is going to produce the desired effect on them.

I, therefore, invite you to share some of my ‘present’ before I start unfolding before you the flash-back of my screen life.

Come along then, I shall take you to a make-up room in one of the studios at Chembur.

True to convention and tradition, the make-up man has applied a *tilak* to the mirror, before getting to work on my face. He has now finished his job. I look at myself in the mirror and notice that the ‘silver’ of my hair is showing rather prominently. Oh, yes, I have not used the *khizab* (dye) for several weeks now! I hastily pick, a dye pencil from the table in front of me and start vigorously drawing it across my temples. There, that’s better!

While I was banishing my grey hair, the dressman called at my room to deliver my military uniform and boots, polished to perfection. The pungent smell of the polish has filled this small make-up room, which is no larger than a cubicle. In fact, mine is one of the three cubicles that have been improvised out of a large room by putting two partitions in it. These make-up rooms are the creations of Bhagwan Dada, who had taken this studio on lease, ten years, ago, following the phenomenal success of his film *Albela*. In his time, Bhagwan Dada was the darling of the working classes. They

used to go wild over his pranks. He was truly their *Bhagwan*, and I had personal experience of the great esteem he was held in by his countless admirers. I had once heard a taxi-driver tell his companion, 'Let him just say, he wants my motor *gadi*, I'll step down and hand over the keys to him!' Both Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar are no doubt much more popular than he is, but they do not enjoy the kind of popularity amongst the poorer classes that Bhagwan Dada does. He never fails to evoke an instant response from them, when he appears on the screen as an unsophisticated, happy-go-lucky simpleton. Indeed they see in him their own image and what endears him to them all the more is that he, a fellow-member of the proletariat, should go and make a beauty like Geeta Bali fall in love with him!

Hindi films have always been divided into three main categories: the social, the religious and the 'stunt'. And it is well-nigh impossible for an artiste to 'migrate' from the one to the other. Since Dada métiers had till then been 'stunt' films, he produced *Albela* himself. Its financial success enabled him to take this studio on lease. Though the lease has now expired, the present owner of the studio, a lady has maintained this room in the condition it was to show her great regard for Bhagwan Dada. But the studio itself has fallen on evil days. One of its two floors has been let out to a factory, where television sets are being- assembled.

As a special gesture to me, the keys of this room have been 'borrowed' from Bhagwan Dada, since the other two rooms have been allotted to Nirupa Roy and Lalita Pawar each. You see, two male stars can manage to share a make-up room but two female stars simply cannot bring themselves to do so—especially if they happen to be" ex-heroines!

Every film star is going to be applied the tag 'ex' some day. How, then, could Geeta Bali escape this fate? It is as well that she is no more now. I had seen her suffer the pangs of anguish in the evening of her film career, when the shadows of approaching oblivion were rapidly gathering around her. As luck would have it, we were then sharing the title roles in a couple of films. Once at the M & T Studio (which is now a factory), I happened to hear her complain bitterly to her saheli, 'All I get now as .my hero is that blackface Balraj!'

Apparently, the memory of an incident of a few years ago was still fresh in her mind. She was then at the peak of her career, a queen whose word was law. She had threatened to turn down the heroine's role in a film—whose story incidentally she had liked very much—just because she had heard that the producer was thinking of signing me for the male lead! Needless to say,

the director eventually made the producer realize the folly of losing the services of so glamorous a star.

Although Bhagwan Dada has now almost retired from films, he keeps this make-up room locked. He has probably a sentimental attachment to this room.

Indeed every make-up room in a studio brings to an artist's mind a host of memories of bygone days. An artiste does not leave merely the imprint of his face on the mirror hung on its wall. The mirror captures the reflection of his soul too!

We showmen live in a world of our own, a world so weird and strange. We make people laugh or cry with us and thereby transport them to the magic world-of fantasy and make-believe. In the process we ourselves become part of that world, which brings added joy to our admirers.

The more streamlined the car of a film star, the higher he rises in his fans esteem. Indeed, the pleasure a fan derives from looking at his favourite star's car is more intense than the pleasure he might get from looking at his own car!

No star, big or small, can resist the temptation of scanning the pages of a film magazine to see if his own photograph adorns one of them. For him, 'the front page news' in a newspaper is always the advertisement of his own film. The satisfaction he gets from seeing his name prominently displayed in a film-advertisement is tremendous. For an actor, that is the acme of happiness.

Nothing pleases a film star more than an artificial thing, made beautiful. His values of beauty are distorted like those reflections you see in curved mirrors. But these 'beautiful objects' fade away one day and when that happens, he becomes sad and disillusioned. He comes down to earth from his world of fantasy. More often than not, life by then has become a nightmare for him. He no longer finds himself the cynosure of admiring eyes, an experience which used to be the very elixir of his life. Death might be preferable to such a life!

What a galaxy of stars must have confided their innermost secrets to the mirror here in this make-up room! I cherish fond memories of the days when this room was newly built. How beautiful it looked then! I distinctly remember a little informal party in this very room, as if it had happened only yes-terday. What an evening it was and what a com-pany of friends to clink glasses with—Radhakrishna, the incomparable comedian, Bhagwan Dada and a few other fellow-artistes! The bottle of whisky had not yet been

uncorked, when Radhakrishna started to narrate a hilarious anecdote. He was in a superb mood that evening. I wish I had paper and pencil to write down all the brilliant ‘quotes’ he was uttering in that inimitable style of his! In no other walk of life have I come across so many gifted conversationalists, men full of generosity and with a zest for life, as I have in this film profession. What a pity then that all these talented men should make only third-rate films!

And as for Radhakrishna, he thought it fit to end his life the other day by hanging himself with a rope.

The entire length of one wall of this room is taken up by a *diwan*, whose plush upholstery is of a deep red colour. The *diwan* is rather like a berth in a first-class railway compartment. A square shaped mirror is fixed at the spot where there would be a window in the railway compartment. I have another look at myself in the mirror. Well, I have almost finished the job of dyeing my hair. High-powered bulbs are fixed to the four sides of the mirror. Their brilliant glow fills the entire room. You have here shelves and drawers to keep the make-up things. The wall opposite is bare, save for a metal bar to hang clothes on and a couple of small cabinets. This bare wall is an eloquent testimony to the sorry pass the room has now come to. The room has obviously been left uncleaned for ages. Everywhere there are thick layers of dust. The whole place is in such shambles that one is reminded of one of those works of modern art — a riot of colours haphazardly splashed on the canvas! All around me there are all manner of stains—of rouge, of *paan*, of rasgulla juice! I try not to look at them for fear of having

my stomach upset. The studio-owners no longer find film-making a profitable business. No wonder then they do not spend a penny on its upkeep. With land prices skyrocketing every day, they can easily get a fabulous price for their studios. Why would they then take any interest in films, a trade which is capable of turning a millionaire into a pauper overnight? I am sure the *malkin* of this studio must be eagerly looking forward to the day when those television makers would offer to hire this other floor too! She would then get an excellent excuse to dismiss all studio workers, and they couldn’t utter a word of protest.

Look, how young and handsome I am looking now, with all my hair dyed! I shall tell you a secret — all my hair has already turned grey, but what does it matter? In fact, half my hair had already turned grey when I joined films. That means, it is more than twenty years now that I have been dyeing it. Some of it had been greyed by the ear-splitting noise emanating from those exploding bombs during our London days, and the rest from the shocks and

knocks I had to endure in the spring of my life. Thus, my entering the film profession is, in a way, a journey from youth to old age!

To be honest, I have had now enough of this business of deceiving both myself and the world, I tell myself, 'Don't you realize, you are now approaching your journey's end? Why not spent the rest of your days studying and writing? Why don't you take it easy, now that Shabnam is married, and Parikshit is a young man' of twenty-seven, so strong and healthy?' You know, he is already being chased by producers. And the knowledge he has acquired about all aspects of film-making! I had to struggle for twenty long years in this profession to know so much about films.

The dress man has helped me get into the military uniform. I have stepped out smartly into the studio premises and am now headed for the office. I am going to ring up that producer who last night had the cheek to insult me. I must settle scores with him.

In fact, the fellow was a great friend of mine, when we were at college together. I consider friendship a very precious relationship. That is why I always try to keep myself aloof from my friends. This friend of mine has over the years made a name for himself as a producer, while I have had a successful career as an actor. By some unfortunate twist in our lives, we happened to cross each other's paths again. I on my part then went out of my way to keep our friendship alive. As a loyal friend, I accepted whatever money he offered me to play a role in his films, which was in fact less than half of what others pay me. No matter how busy I might be elsewhere, I always found time to respond to his call and rush to his studio, and yet the fellow ignored me and treated me very shabbily! Well, he too is going to get something from me, I am not going to take his insult lying down! I cannot help wondering, though, why he must behave like that.

Throughout the night, I was tossing and turning in my bed, and when I got up in the morning, the sting of that insult had not lessened in any way!

Before leaving home yesterday, I had a look at my appointment book. My secretary had made an entry which said that after finishing a spell of shooting at Chembur, I was scheduled to appear in two scenes in my friend's film, which was being shot in a studio at Dadar. The shooting, was to last from 7 to 10 in the evening.

Tired though I was, I trekked all the way to Dadar to keep the appointment. I arrived at the studio on time only to find my friend filming some other scene in which I had no part. The fellow gave me, such a look of

contempt, as if I had entered his bedroom without knocking! He not only ignored me completely, but did not even have the courtesy to apologize to me for having mistakenly called me. He should have at least told me, when my shot was to be taken. Even his servants gave me the cold shoulder. I returned home in frustration.

On my way home, I thought that perhaps it was I who had made some mistake. I might have misread the date in the appointment book. On reaching home, I went straight to my study and checked the entry in the appointment book carefully. No, I had not made any mistake, nor for that matter had my secretary. The discovery made me mad with rage.

I was still fuming and fretting when I joined my son and a friend of his at the dinner table. They were in the midst of a discussion on the life style of Russian film actors. My son was telling his friend; 'In Russia, a film star's salary is about equal to a professor's or an engineer's. He travels in buses and trains like ordinary folk. Very few film stars have cars of their own, and nobody considers them as unique personalities or their work extraordinarily important. In fact, it is the script writer or its director who is paid more than the actor.'

I could not help interjecting, 'But you must know, there is a world of difference between our social conditions and theirs!'

My remark made my son and his friend look at me in amazement. Here in India, even in your own home, you have to put on airs to command respect *from* your near ones- As for the outside world then, the less said the better! For some time past, that producer-friend of mine had been dropping discreet hints to let me know that he would like me to play a role in one of his films. He had painted a very rosy picture of the role he was going to offer me, but I had not shown any particular inclination to accept it, since I was not interested in that role. He had probably interpreted my reluctance as my hauteur, or perhaps, he had thought I was angling for more money) Now I know why he was so uncivil to me! What a mean way to treat a friend of thirty years' standing!

As I walk past the studio canteen, I see two lads leaning out of the kitchen-window. In fact, I have spotted them out from a distance and have immediately started adjusting my army hat,

'Hello, Balraj!' the younger one hails me, as if I were his equal in age.

'Hello!' I return his greeting with a smile, and continue walking at a brisk pace.

‘Dharmindra’s father!’, I hear the elder one saying. At that my pace slackens.

At this stage of my career, I find myself in an awkward situation. While in H. S. Hawaii’s film *Sanghursh*, I court Vyjayanthimala and Dilip Kumar as my rival, I play the role of her father in a Sham Behl film. Some producers consider me young enough to court heroines, while others would have me become their father!

Despite advancing age, my demand in the film market shows no signs of diminishing, a phenomenon which the producers must no doubt find inexplicable! Indeed, even when I was a young man, I had not played the sort of romantic roles, which I am now called upon to play!

Never once in my youth had any of my fans said in their letters that they considered me a handsome man, and now I get letters from young girls, saying, ‘How handsome you look in that white suit in *Aye Din Bahar Ke!* Can you send me your coloured photograph in the same pose?’¹ When I read such letters, I cannot help wondering whether I am the same artiste who played the peasant in Bimal Roy’s *Do Bigha Zamin*.

It is as a young man that I appear in that film my producer-friend is making. Could it be that he has become jealous of my rising popularity and my film-youth? He is probably surprised to find another Ashok Kumar rising on the film horizon! Maybe, it is to get rid of his inferiority complex that he insulted me that evening!

Well, if that is the case, I won’t come to any harm. The thought bucks me up. A sprightliness creeps into my gait and I walk ahead, with my head held high. I lapse into day-dreaming... In Hollywood, the stars attain the peak of their profession when they reach my age. Who knows, fate may have willed that I set an example in our country a *la* Hollywood? But then, if that happened, where would Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand be? They are, after all, years younger than I. With me at the top, they would simply lose all interest in life itself and the pleasure they get from dining, wining and sleeping would turn into ashes!

...with great effort, I have brought myself to come back to earth from this dream world. I tell myself, ‘Don’t go on building castles in the air. Can you ever dream of enjoying the kind of popularity and esteem these superstars are enjoying?’

I notice everywhere in the studio premises old sets and statues of gods and goddesses from long forgot-ten religious films. I muse, one day they might discover the rotten bones of Balraj Sahni under one of these statues!

What has become of all that adulation the public used to shower on artistes like Saigal, Kanan Bala, Pahadi Sanyal, Jinnah, Barua and Chandramohan! As for my producer-friend, he too is going to have to accept the fate which eventually befell the artistes of the New Theatres and Prabhat Film Company. It is only a matter of time before he too goes their way!

And look at what is happening to the Bombay studios! You find them vanishing one by one. The Government is bent on constructing a road which will run right through Guru Dutt's studio, while there is not a trace left of Central Studios. I cannot pass that spot in Central Bombay without having a host of memories come crowding into my mind. It was in this very Central Studios that I had appeared before the cameras for the last time with Yakub, who died a few days later. The late Al Nasir too had a role in that film, which had remained on the shelf for a number of years. Finally, it was released as *Akela*. After all, it is the shadows which flit across the silver screen that lend reality to the lives of us film artistes. I can, therefore, never forgive those who rob our lives of this reality by pulling down film studios!

And to my producer-friend too, I am not going to show any leniency! I do not care whether he has insulted me wilfully or I am merely imagining things. I shall have my revenge and make no mistake about it! I have thought out a perfect plan to teach him a lesson. This plan of mine would have him and his unit all set for a location shooting on a Bombay street. The hour would be midday. In the fierce sun, they would all be waiting impatiently for me to arrive, since it is of me that the shot is going to be taken. And you know, where I would be then? In Delhi, having a nice time! We shall thus be quits... Here I am in the studio office, where I see a telephone on a table over there. Let me see now, what's the number of that blighter, 343...

That will do for the 'present'. Let's now switch on the 'flash-back'.

Two

I was a boy of about eight years when I had my first experience of films. I remember the whole of Rawalpindi was then terrified of the impending visitation of the bubonic plague. And as luck would have it, mother once saw a rat playing about in the house. The same day she packed us children and fled to Bhare, an ancestral place of the Sahnis. The town had separate *mullas* for the Sahnis, the Sethis and the other Khatri and Khukhren clans. God alone knows how this compartmentalisation had come about.

This 'migration' no doubt meant that we were now safe from the dreaded disease, but it also exposed us to an atmosphere of terror and lawlessness.

There was more *of* a village than a town. There is a world of difference between the atmosphere in today's villages and the one that used to reign in the villages under the British Raj. Things were no doubt very cheap then and people had more financial security. All the same, the brutality and highhandedness of the constabulary had reached their limit in the villages. Their beastly behaviour towards the villagers had become the order of the day. Inevitably, this had resulted in the villagers themselves becoming cruel monsters, devoid of any sense of decency or fair play. Indeed, the whole atmosphere was so viti-ated that law-abiding citizens were finding it increasingly difficult to lead a normal, peaceful life. They would naturally take the first opportunity to flee to a big city like Lahore or Rawalpindi, since the prospect of any improvement in rural conditions was no-where in sight. With remarkable foresight, the British had started training the village folk of the Punjab in the art of cutting each other's throats, as early as those distant days. This training stood the Punjabis in good stead, when India was partitioned in 1947.

One day it was announced in our school that all the boys would be taken to a 'bioscope show'. A *shamiana* was erected for the purpose on a *maidan* on the outskirts of the town. As it was open to the sky, the show, was going to be performed at night-fall. Near the screen, a high *machan* was set up, from where an announcer used to give a running commentary on the goings-on on the screen, since Sims had not yet become 'talkies'. (Indeed all the *Alias* were then imported from England.)

Even our masters and the headmaster of the school, those august personages, were going to accompany us *boys* to the show, to which we were being admitted at half price. Mother gave me and my brother permission to go to the show without much ado. In fact, she was pleased to do so.

The incident I am narrating here happened a good 45 years ago. Naturally, I do not remember anything about the film except that it was not a detective film.

But the thing about that film which I have not forgotten and which I am not likely ever to forget is that in several love scenes the heroine would suddenly strip herself completely! And then the announcer would say in a reassuring tone, 'Believe me, sahib, this woman here is not naked. She is now wearing a magic dress, which can carry her through the air anywhere she wants to go! She can see everyone, but no one can see her!'

At that tender age, I thought. Perhaps the man is telling the truth.' What was unique about her nakedness, however, was that only her face used to remain white. From the neck downwards, her whole body would turn black! It was either due to a black make-up applied to her bare body or probably she was made to wear a close-fitting black dress of the sheer-est material! Anyway, no one from the audience, least of all our headmaster, uttered a word of protest against this indecent exposure. Since it was not then the practice to admit women to cinema shows, why raise a hue and cry over something which everyone was obviously enjoying? After all, the announcer had given his solemn assurance that the woman was not naked! Innocent that we were, we children accepted his explanation in good faith. That absolved us of any sense of sin too! It was possible, though, that some member of the audience' may have thought of rising from his seat to voice his protest, but nothing of the kind happened. Probably he thought it wiser to keep mum, since everyone else in the audience was an accomplice in the act of watching that scene. A parallel from the film industry would be the acquiescence of many of the film actors in the conversion of 'black' money into 'white', much against their will. One more parallel comes to mind.

In 1947, people preferred to watch in silence young girls being raped by hundreds of men at market-places. The surrounding atmosphere exerts a powerful influence on men's minds. This is especially true of the Punjabis, which explains their moral degradation.

I do not quite remember whether that scene had awakened any sexual passion in me. All I remember is that, being on the threshold of youth, the close-up, of the women's bare breasts used to be a source of secret pleasure for me when I was alone! I am in no position to say how much mental or physical loss I suffered from this 'day-dreaming' of mine! I am sure, however, that I was not a gainer by any means!

A few days later, I had occasion to see a film which was even more wicked. Our cook had taken me to that *shamiana* on the *maidan* and both of us climbed a tree behind the *shamiana*.

Apparently, they were going to show a special film, for which, however, we had no money. Although our tree was at some distance from the *shamiana*, from our perch we could see the screen clearly. The show started and in the very first scene a man and a woman started copulating the way dogs do! I was terrified since I had no idea what they were up to. I started howling at the top of my voice and pulling the cook's legs, who was sitting on a branch higher than mine. He told me to shut up but when he saw that I refused to be pacified, he had to come down eventually and take me home.

That spectacle had then induced in me only nausea but as I stepped into adolescence, I began to find it attractive too! In fact, I took to admonishing my-self for having spoilt the fun of that cook of ours! It was probably after ages that the poor fellow was enjoying an outing!

. This was my first encounter with films. This first film in my life had affected me profoundly, since I had seen how a woman is made to serve as a mere tool to satisfy a man's passion!

Now-a-days, it is not possible to show such films openly in our villages (Incidentally, they are mostly imported clandestinely from abroad). But towns-people have other more sophisticated means at their disposal today to corrupt the simple village folk. They can do so with impunity mainly because the urban intelligentsia has remained indifferent to the interests of the villagers, which was what the Britisher's had been doing in their time. If only our educated men and women would establish a rapport with the villagers, the unscrupulous urban riffraff would not dare to exploit them. That would also enable us to save our folk-music and dances from extinction, but who cares?

For several years after this incident, I did not see any films. Rawalpindi did not have a picture-house then. There were several theatres in the town, though, which were regularly frequented by the citizens. My, school-mates used to narrate many interesting anecdotes about these theatres, but I could not go any-where near them. My father was a staunch Arya Samajist, and there was simply no question of my defying any of his orders. That period of my life can be properly described by the epithet 'religious'. In-deed I used even to dream of gods and paramatmas. In one of these dreams, I saw Bhagwan himself sit-ting on the steps of the staircase in our house. I re-member he was wearing one of those caps the pun bias wear.

I was now in the 10th standard and we had to read a novel entitled *Rupert of Hentzau* for our English language course. One day our class was agog with the news that the headmaster was going to take all the boys to a function arranged to celebrate the inauguration, of Rawalpindi's first picture-house, the Rose Cinema and, as luck would have it, it was go-ing to show a film based on the novel *Rupert of Hentzau*!

How clever these businessmen are! This impending visit of our class put my father in a dilemma—to let or not to let me see the film! The new age had arrived and it was knocking on the doors of his house. Should he open the door? Finding himself in two minds, he decided to consult our head-master. As the two pondered over this problem in Father's study, I

stood outside the door listening! The headmaster was saying, 'Don't be so old-fashion-ed, Lalaji! Films are not made merely to entertain people. They educate them too and moreover making films is an art. And as for this particular film, it is based on the text-book which we have prescribed for your son's class. How can it possibly do any harm to the boys? In fact, boys of the 10th standard from other schools of the city are going to see this film; and they will pay only half the usual rate. If anything, your son will be a loser if you don't let him go!' Father could not refute this argument. I got his permission to join my classmates.

The inaugural function at the Rose Cinema was truly a spectacular event. It was graced by the pre-sence of the English Deputy Commissioner of Rawal-pindi and several Rai Sahibs and Khan Sahibs. But the film itself was practically useless from our point of view, since it had hardly anything in common with the plot of the novel we were supposed to study for our examination. That apart, the thing which imp-ressed us most was that two men with identical faces would kiss the heroine every now and then! No doubt this must have embarrassed our headmaster to no end, since he too was as staunch an Arya Samajist as Father, and there was absolutely no refe-rence to any kissing in our text-book!

I had now a ready means at my disposal to get Father's consent whenever I wanted to see a film. All I had to do was to tell him that the film was based on a novel with a highly moralistic plot! Naturally this ruse did not work always, but by then I had learnt the art of going to the pictures on the sly!

The Rose Cinema-house was right in the heart of the town. Eventually, it started showing Hindustani films. Once in awhile, however it screened English films too, such as the Elmo Lincoln serial. Two films which had impressed me very much in those days were *Heer Ranjha* and *Anarkali*. In, the former, I had liked the man who used to beat his drum to attract the villagers. All of them would then go and sit under the tree to listen to his story of Heer.

I was literally swept off my feet by the beauty of Sulochana who as Anarkali haunted my dreams for months. And that last scone, where poor Anarkali was shown being buried alive brought tears to my eyes. I had lost nay heart to the girl and could not bear to see Akbar's officers applying the last brick to the wall of the coffin which finally enclosed her beautiful face! It was an' outrage which had left me grief-stricken. I was then in such a mood that if someone had told me it was all a cinema trick and that no brick had actually been applied to Sulochana's face, I would have slapped him! As

far as I was concerned, Sulochana was dead, and I had now no interest left in life!

But, of course, Sulochana is very much alive and in several films she has acted with me. Whenever I tell her about my calf-love for her, she only laughs it away! I am now a film star myself and so can well understand what lies behind that laugh of hers. And yet I cannot banish from my mind the thought of telling her some day that it was not merely a silly infatuation on my part, but my first real experience of falling in love!

Let me narrate to you here an incident which happened recently. We were proceeding to Ladakh in a jeep to take some shots for *Haqeeqat*. En route we made a night-halt at a place called Daras, where our troops were stationed. The Commanding Officer, a colonel, made us welcome and invited us to come and stay at the Officers' Mess. He threw a small party in our honour later in the evening when all the officers of the unit were present. We had with us Dharmendra, and those two beauties, Priya and Indrani Mukherji. As the party got going, our middle-aged colonel spotted Sulochana sitting all by herself in a corner. He could not bring himself to take his eyes off her. He appeared to be trying to remember where he had seen her. Gradually, his eyes lit up and the whole expression on his face changed to one of joy and pleasure—he had realised that it was the dream-girl of his youth, who was sitting opposite him! All the other artistes in the hall then ceased to exist for him. For the rest of the evening, he relived with the queen of his heart those sunny days of his distant youth!. As a fourteen-year-old lad, I myself had fallen victim to her charms, and here was a fifty-year-old army colonel undergoing the same emotional experience!

I would ask those learned men, who turn up their noses at films, to give a serious thought to how intensively the cinema can affect all sections of society!

Three

I was now a college student. Having left behind my school days, I discarded pyjamas and took to wearing trousers. As a reward for passing his matriculation examination, the young student got a bicycle from his parents, and that brought all the cinema houses of the town within his easy reach!

Rawalpindi of those days had no other claim to glory except as a cantonment town of the British Indian Army. The people too were a dull lot on the whole. Though residents of the old city, the educated classes lived

mentally in the cantonment or in the clean, quiet and genteel environs of the Civil Lines, these classes rather looked down upon everything *swadeshi*—dress, food, in fact, the whole *swadeshi* way of life! You rose in their esteem to the extent that you had outgrown the *swadeshi* heritage. And as for college students, they simply followed in the footsteps of their professors.

The cinema-houses in the cantonment were clean and had imposing facades. They showed English films; which were patronised mostly by the British. If it was one of your lucky days, the occupant of the seat next to you might be a ‘white’ beauty. The atmosphere in those cinema-houses matched the romantic nature of the actors and actresses you saw on the screen. How passionately those shapely, white women used to surrender themselves to their lovers’ embraces, without the slightest inhibition! How eagerly they would look forward to being kissed! Every time I saw a *vilayati* film, its wonderful spell would last for days together!

Dolores Costello was a glittering star of that era of silent films and, with John Barrymore, she would make a fine pair. In a number of films they had acted together, and their love scenes used to be particularly exciting. To wit: Dolores, the princess, is fast asleep in her palace. The night is dark and still. Suddenly the sky becomes overcast and there is thunder and lightning. The princess wakes up with a start. She runs out of her bedroom in panic, clad only in a sleeping-gown. Her hair is dishevelled and she is beside herself. In the balcony outside, John, the gallant officer of the court, and a swashbuckling swordsman, is waiting for her. When she sees him there, so handsome and brave, she forgets that in the afternoon she had vowed never to see his face again! She cannot but surrender herself to his embrace and as the camera comes closer, John plants a passionate kiss on her eager lips! That long, vigorous kiss still lingers in my memory. Several film periodicals like *The Picturegoer* used to carry copious articles, describing in detail John’s love-technique. We college boys would read and discuss them with great relish. To our parents, however, we would give the impression that these films were based on works of great authors such as Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, Alexander Dumas and Walter Scott. We would tell them that since the pictures on the screen were also accompanied by subtitles in English, seeing films served as a useful aid in our study of English literature.

Our parents would take these yarns of ours with a pinch of salt. They just could not bring themselves to believe that something which entertained you could be so harmless!

Romance, however, was not the only aspect of films which thrilled us. There was also a good deal of daring horsemanship and sword fighting. In

the film *The Cossacks*, John Gilbert had achieved incredible feats in both these arts and the Russian fur-cap he had worn for his role became overnight a fashion amongst Rawalpindi's college students. You came away from these films, full of plans for doing something similar, but all you could do was to pick up your bicycle and pedal away as fast as your strength allowed!

A visit to a picture-house in the Cantonment to see a Barrymore or a Gilbert film was by no means all fun and enjoyment. At the end of the show, everyone had to stand up and remain still while 'God Save the King' was being played. This was as if you were ordered to slap your own face, in the presence of your fellow-countrymen! Once a friend of mine was a little slow in rising from his seat. Smack landed an English officer's baton on his head! Such insults had become the order of the day for us Indians!

I had become very fond of that Russian cap. My friends were of the view that I looked exactly like Gilbert in it, and this view was also shared by my mirror. I had recently seen another of Gilbert's films in which he had repeated those daring feats, this time with the ski. I was, of course, totally unaware then that the hero of a film never actually rides a horse or skis at that terrific speed. He appears only in a close-up shot which is taken in the safe precincts of a studio. A real horseman or a skier then substitutes for him as a 'dummy' in 'long' and 'medium' shots and even he need not expose himself to unnecessary risks. All that is done is that the camera is run at a slightly reduced speed when shooting those dare-devil riders and skiers. This little manipulation with the speed of the movie-camera (which is known as a 'trick-shot' in film-parlance) makes those horses gallop at thrice their actual speed, when you see the scene on the screen!

Anyway, I was cycling that day *a la* Gilbert on Pindi's Mall Road. I had almost reached a busy square, when I saw a motor-cycle approaching it from the opposite direction. I jammed on the brakes and got off the bike, chewing the chewing gum, nonchalantly, again *a la* Gilbert. The motor-cycle-rider had the entire road at his disposal to drive past me, but the fellow, an arrogant Englishman, started abusing me in vilest language. Since a *mem sahib* was riding on the pillion, the sting of that insult became all the more unbearable to me. I had a feeling, though, that as they rode away, the fairy-princess smiled at me sympathetically. If my cycle had an engine, I would have followed that blighter and paid him in the same coin. But all I could do was to stand there, fuming and fretting!

Even the great Rai Bahadurs and Khan Bahadurs had often to put up with such insolent behaviour. We, the students or our professors, were after all

small fry! Everyone had his own special way of dealing with these cads, but no thought of taking revenge on them ever crossed his mind.

On the contrary, every Indian of standing was forever trying his best to turn himself into an Englishman. His one ambition in life was to make him-self acceptable to his white masters. He looked forward to the day when they would do him the honour of admitting him to their brotherhood!

This kind of situation, however, is not new to the Punjab. From time immemorial, the Punjab has been the gateway to India, through which the white races such as the Aryans, the Greeks, the Turks and others had invaded the country. In the process there has been a lot of intermingling of races in this area. Consequently, you find here extraordinarily handsome men and women, fair and endowed with classical features. Witness the countless number of stars, the Punjab has given to the film industry— Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Raj Kumar, Rajendra Kumar, Dev Anand, Dharmendra, Shashi Kapoor, Shammi Kapoor,—the procession is endless! And it is to the Punjab that producers and directors keep turning in search of new talent.

In the course of his film career, this humble writer too has often been compared with Gary Cooper, Ronald Colman, Humphrey Bogart and Anthony Quinn. And everyone, of course, knows that Dev Anand has been called the Gregory Peck of India.

The rest of India followed Gandhiji to preserve their self-respect, but the Punjabis found it more profitable to ape the Englishman. Even in independent India, they have not given up this habit of theirs, and if truth be told, Indians from other parts of the country too have now started behaving like the Punjabis, abandoning the Gandhian path.

There was a time when men of our film industry too had been inspired by the thoughts of Gandhi and Tagore, as a result of which institutions like the Prabhat and New Theatres had come into existence. But thanks to the decisive influence the Punjabis have come to wield in this profession today, our films too have become artificial.

Surely an eighteen-year-old lad could not have remained unaffected by all that deceit his own people were practising on themselves. No sooner I returned home from an English movie, than I would run to my mirror and 'admire' myself from every possible angle. And every time my image used to 'tally' exactly with the face of the hero of the particular film I had seen that evening. I used to wonder at this strange phenomenon, which made me look like so many different heroes of Hollywood! I used to stand rooted in front of the mirror till finally I heard the admonishing voice of my father or

mother! And I always had some excuse ready for them to explain away my coming home late that evening.

This practice of mine of telling lies virtually made me incapable of telling truth. I know, I am not lacking in self-respect. Indeed no son of a gun has ever been able to humble me, no matter what his status! And yet, whenever I have to meet someone, socially or otherwise, I feel like a culprit in his presence, a culprit who is hiding a secret! Even the success and the fame I have achieved as a film actor appear to me as some kind of a crime I have committed! People often make mention of my courteous demeanour. Actually, this self-effacement on my part is largely the result of a sense of guilt, which in turn comes from the low opinion my parents had of films. They had always impressed upon me that film acting was no profession for gentlemen.

My own childhood coincided with the 'childhood' of the film industry. Very early in my life, I had found myself drawn to films and I was by no means alone in this. My entire generation had found the attraction of films irresistible. I still remember the day when Prithviraj Kapoor and Jagdish Sethi had come to Koh-Muree (a place near Rawalpindi) to bid good-bye to their friends, before leaving for Bom-bay to join films. I was then much younger than they, and so could only make a mental note of what was happening around me. The alien rulers had closed all avenues of progress to the irrepressible young men of the Punjab. But their indomitable spirit was something which no one could deprive them of! And films were the one profession, where young Punjabis could indulge themselves to their heart's content, which they could not do in their everyday life!

Hariram Sethi was one of our fashionable and enterprising young men. It was he who was the first man to set up a commercial film company in the Punjab. It was Rawalpindi's 'Punjab Film Company' and the first film to be produced at its studios was *Abala*. Tilak Bhasin, Baba Bhishma Singh and several of my friends had acted in it. The director had 'imported' a young man from Bengal for the hero's role. All the young men of Rawalpindi had taken unkindly to this act and we would roam about in the premises of the studio, when the shooting was on, just to show him that every one of us was far more handsome than he!

Ramautai, the corpulent film comedian, had run away from home in Rawalpindi. The late Pralhad Dutt was, in his time, the most versatile and talented cameraman of the Bombay film industry. His film technique had won acclaim even in Europe and America. I remember several outings made in the company of Dutt and Tilak Bhasin. At 'Kashmir Point' and 'Pindi

Point', we would discuss 'situations' for a two-reeler comedy! Dutt was once arrested for uprooting the pole in the compound of an Englishman's house, bearing his name plate. Apparently, Dutt was looking for some hidden treasure there. Later Dutt went on to invent a special type of movie-camera, whose fame had spread all over the country. If I am not mistaken, he had even made bombs for Bhagat Singh's revolutionary party! His colleague Harbans Bhalla is still working in the Madras film industry. He has his own laboratory there.

One more incident I remember from those Rawal-pindi days is Jaykishen Nanda's (Maker of that memorable film *Ishara*) 'bolt' to Germany to become a film-hero! Our R.C. Talwar was already in Hollywood. Thus there were any number of fellow-Rawalpindians who had joined the film profession long before I did.

In the year 1930, the course of ray life took a de-cisive turn. I left Rawalpindi for Lahore, where I enrolled myself in the Government College to study for B.A. The year also marked a significant land-mark in the history of the Indian Film Industry, In that it ushered in the era of 'talkies'. When *Alam Ara* came to the city's Capital Cinema, the news spread like wildfire. The crowds were phenomenal and it was with great difficulty that I managed to secure a tic-keT.

It was only a week ago that I had gone to the capital to see Jean Harlow^ in Hell's *Angels*, As I stood in the queue in front of the ticket counter, I heard someone mention that a. private show of the film *Abala* (which was made in Rawalpindi) was at that moment being given in that cinema-house and that Imtiaz Ali Taj and Ahmed Shah Bukhari were amongst the invited dignitaries. The latter was my professor. Presently the show was over and I saw Prof. Bukhari emerge from the auditorium. I ran to him and asked him his opinion about the film. He sounded very pessimistic. 'From the technical point of view, the film is no doubt on par with the best of American films,' he opined. 'It is, there-fore, all the greater pity, that when spending all those thousands of rupees, it never occurred to the producer that the days of the silent films are over!'

The film spelt the ruin of its producer, Lala Hariram Sethi, and yet I did not feel sorry for this fellow-Rawalpindian. On the contrary, I was rather elated at the thought that we Rawalpindians did after all manage to compete with the 'firangis' on equal terms!

Alam Ara, on the other hand, was a very ordinary film, technically speaking. Despite this, it filled the coffers of its producers. I was, of course,

then too young to understand the technique of film-making, nor was I aware of that unpredictable factor, which may bring box office success to a very bad film and utter failure to a really good one!

Now that I was living in the College Hostel, I was my own master. I could see as many films as I wished. My 'score' was about three American films per week. It was, therefore, inevitable that their influence on my impressionable mind should become more pronounced with the passage of time. And yet, not once did I seriously entertain any thought of becoming a film actor. If anyone was keen on becoming a film actor, he should go to Hollywood to become one instead of rotting in Indian films, that's what I used to think!

. By the time I was studying for the M.A., I had developed a discerning taste for literature. Moreover, I had started acting in plays, staged by the college's dramatic society, which was then presided over by the one and only Prof. Bukhari. His colleagues, Profs. G. D. Sondhi, Ishwar Chandra Nanda and Imtiaz Ali Taj, too enjoyed a countrywide reputation. I am proud to say that it was the Government College, Lahore, and particularly its Dramatic Society which taught me the rudiments of the art of acting and made me familiar with those plays, whose hall-mark was realism. It was thus Prof. Bukhari and his colleagues who guided me along right lines and kept before me the ideals an artiste should strive to achieve. I salute the memory of these *gurus* of mine! Their help and guidance were a great help to me, since it is only when you've seen your goal clearly that you will reach it somehow, no matter how many impediments you may encounter en route!

New Theatres' *Puran Bhagat*, when released at a cinema-house on McLeod Road, created a tremendous stir amongst the educated, anglicised Punjabi youth, a set I then belonged to. The film opened our eyes, as it were, and we had to change our outlook on Indian films.

Not content merely with seeing the film myself — I must have seen it about six times—I used to take my friends and acquaintances along. We, who till then had been looking down upon everything indigenous, became overnight ardent champions of Indian culture!

Puran Bhagat blazed a new trail. A succession of highly aesthetic films followed, amongst them Prabhat's *Duniya na mane*, *Amrit Manthan*, *Aadmi* and then Saigal appeared on the film horizon.

Despite these films, however, I do not recollect my passion for American and English films waning in any way. Hindi films still fell short of the

criteria I had set for them. They were not yet capable of portraying life realistically.

Came the end of my university days. I was now on the threshold of life, all set to take the plunge. I was, however destined to take very hard knocks right at the outset of my career, and they left me bleeding like hell!

When I found that in the hard practical world my M.A. degree amounted to just nothing, I was left with no other alternative but to give in to my father's wishes and join the family business. But before long, I found myself a misfit in the world of clothiers.

It was I think the year 1936, when I decided I had had enough of this business of selling suit lengths and drapery. Without much ado, I quietly ran away to Calcutta and straightaway went to Pandit Sudarshan, who was then the story-writer of New Theatres. I asked him his opinion about my joining the 'films.

His reaction to this resolve of mine was one of alarm. Apparently, he had misunderstood me. I seemed to have given him the impression that I was a callow, misguided youth who had been attracted by the glamour of the film world. He was afraid that if I took up film acting as a career, I would surely come a cropper and thus ruin my life. He was moreover personally concerned with my well-being, since he was a friend of my father's, who was bound to blame him, if he 'led me astray'. As for me, I was making a serious and honest attempt to find some footing in life.

After having led a brief, rootless existence in Calcutta, I returned to Rawalpindi. I had drawn a blank at this first attempt.

A year passed, in the course of which I realised that life was no bed of roses. It revealed itself as a hard taskmaster and the experience chastened me. In the meanwhile, I got married.

Once again I found myself knocking on the door of Pandit Sudarshan's fiat. This time, however, I was accompanied by my wife. We were given a warm welcome by Sudarshanji, who introduced me to his wife as 'that nice young man who heeded my advice and gave up the foolhardy plan of joining films'. I was nonplussed. How could I tell him that, far from abandoning any idea of taking up a film career, I had in fact come to him once again to seek his help in my efforts to get a break in the film line?

Our meeting was in the nature of a family reunion, with my host and hostess enquiring solicitously after my parents and my wife's people. Finally, our hostess asked me the question I was dreading most. 'What do you do now, son?'

‘I am in business,’ I blurted out. Before she could ask me any more embarrassing questions, we took our leave.

Eventually, I secured a job in Shantiniketan through the good offices of Ajneya and Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, whose metier was literature and politics rather than films. This job gave me much-needed confidence, which by that time had reached its nadir. Though the salary offered was a mere fifty rupees, a lecturer at Gurudev’s Shantiniketan (He was then alive) was a much honoured and respected person. When we went home in the Puja holidays, practically the entire town turned up at the Rawalpindi station to welcome us with bouquets and garlands!

Those Shantiniketan days have remained in my memory as a priceless experience. To my wife Dammo (Damayanti), too, the place offered the kind of opportunities for development, which were unheard of in the restricted society of Rawalpindi. It was here that she did her B.A. and participated in numerous extra-curricular activities. Both of us felt happy and contented, living amongst the sylvan sur-roundings of Shantiniketan.

On one of our visits to Calcutta, we decided to call on Prithviraj Kapoor, who was a bosom friend of Dammo’s elder brother. We received a very cordial welcome from him. Raj Kapoor was then a twelve-year-old lad, very lovable and charming. I remember that visit distinctly since Prithviraj and Jagdish Bhapa had taken us to the New Theatres studio, where *Prescient* was being shot, with Saigal and Leela Desai in the main roles. Nitin Bose was the director.

It turned out to be a prophetic meeting, in that with both Leela Desai and Nitin Bose, I was to be associated in later years. I played the *Pathan* in the for-mer’s *Kabuliwallah*, while Nitin Bose directed me in *Kathputli*, after Amiya Chakrabarty’s demise. Dam-mo, too, went on to play the lead opposite Prithvirajjt in his play *Deewaar*.

However, the man I was really keen to meet was Barua. I am afraid we called on him rather unceremoniously. Ignoring his secretary, my wife and I headed straight for the drawing-room and made ourselves comfortable on the sofa there. The room was lined with cupboards packed with books. We spotted there a full set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and were duly impressed!

Apparently, the secretary had in the meanwhile gone and informed his master that two visitors from Shantiniketan wished to see him. Before long, we were sent for. We were, however, given to understand that the meeting would last only a few minutes since his wife was not keeping well.

His wife? Could she be Jumna? Although we were dying to know, neither had the courage to ask him! Barua struck me as a very tired man. He eyed us questioningly, which rather put us off. For want of anything better to say, we launched into an 'analysis' of his films ... Why didn't he take that scene in *Mukti* in a different way If only he had cast X instead of Y for that part in *Manzil*.

Barua just let us talk, giving us a patient hearing. At last when we had had our say, he sat there, Devdas-like, for a considerable time, engrossed in thought. Finally, he asked us, 'You want to work in films?'

Both of us were taken aback at this unexpected question.

Dammo was the first to gather her wits. She answered on an impulse, 'Oh, certainly—why not?' 'Very well then. Come to the studio tomorrow at ten o'clock,' so saying Barua bade us good-bye.

The rest of the day, we spent building castles in the air. Now that the celebrated Barua himself had invited us to his studio, it was only a matter of time before we became stars!

Little did we know then that this was a pet ruse of directors to fend themselves off from aspiring artistes. Possibly, Barua would have refused to see us if we had taken him at his word and called at the studio the next morning. I am sure though, that Barua had not meant to fob us off! This was evident from the letter he subsequently wrote to Dammo, promising her a major role in his next film. When-ever during our Shantiniketan days we had a tiff, she would dangle this letter in my face, as if to threaten me!

Eventually, we found ourselves in Sevagram. Its milieu had, of course, nothing to do with films. I had by then won a fair amount of publicity as a Hindi short story writer which, considering my age; was more than what I deserved. Being on the brink of war, the world at large was going through tremendous upheavals. Hitler's and Mussolini's forces were laying Europe to waste. Gandhiji had forced Subhash Bose to resign the presidentship of the Congress, which had made the people uneasy. At Seva-gram, we had an opportunity to see at close quarters Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad and several other top leaders of the country. I remember, Dammo had once made tea and poured it herself for Sir Stafford Cripps and Pandit Nehru. Zakir Hussain was the president of the educational institution I was then working in, living and working in such an atmosphere, which was, moreover, ennobled by the presence of Kasturba, Mira Ben and Asha Ben, our thoughts were naturally far removed from films.

And then came the news that war had broken out in Europe. Once again, Dammo and I found our-selves caught in life's vortex, which finally took us to London, to work for the B.B.C. as programme announcers.

Four

London made an unforgettable impression on me. Our arrival there coincided with that deceptive lull in hostilities between Hitler's annexation of Poland and his subsequent onslaught in spring. The British nation had deluded itself into believing that now that Hitler had got what he had wanted, he would rest on his laurels. Even the Chamberlain government had allowed itself to become complacent. No wonder then, that the people appeared gay and carefree, bent on having a good time at all costs!

Never before had I witnessed so much wealth and prosperity, nor had I ever imagined that the common man could enjoy such a high standard of living, free from economic worries. True, both at Shantiniketan and at Sevagram, it was impressed upon me that all that wealth was squeezed out of India. But then the visual impression on the human mind often gets the better of what lies hidden in the subconscious. Moreover, in India one could admire the beauty of woman only from a distance, a handicap one need not suffer here!

I could not fail to observe the vast difference between life in England and that in India, which was the difference between opulence and freedom on one hand, and want and bondage on the other! In the midst of so much luxury and with an easy access to so many places of cheap entertainment, I became totally oblivious of the rich cultural fare—plays, concerts, art galleries, and the like—that London had to offer. Turning my back on these, I took to spending most of my salary on ogling at half-naked women at strip-tease clubs!

And then, when Hitler struck, without any warning, everyone was caught napping! People's initial fasci-nation for war and the sense of thrill it had produced in them slowly gave way to dread—dread of death and destruction! As for me, I did not dread death itself so much as the eventuality of ending my days on foreign soil. Moreover, I used to feel uneasy at the thought that neither I personally nor my country had any-thing to do with this war!

In such an atmosphere, seeing a film was no longer merely a source of entertainment. While you sat in a picture-house, your thoughts were away

from war, which gave you a sense of security and, with it, a brief respite from anxiety. The sense of security would, of course, vanish, the moment the show was over and stepping out into the street, you felt in your bones the tenseness in the atmosphere, vitiated as it was by war psychosis.

It was then that I used to feel that all that time I had been watching the film; I was being made a fool of! I became convinced that films served merely as a means to make people forget the stark realities of life—a kind of sedative, like alcohol, a cigarette or a woman! I no longer viewed films as an art-form. In my eyes, they became ‘devalued’. A couple of days later, however, the war situation changed radically, *in* the light of which, I had to change my opinion—Russia had now entered the war as an ally of England, and a cinema on Tottenham Court Road started showing Russian films.

It was, in fact, a Russian, film which I happened to see in that picture-house that restored my confidence in films, indeed in life itself. It brought home to me the nobility and the magnanimity the human spirit was capable of displaying. After all these years, I still recollect every detail of that memorable film. It was called *The Circus*. An American circus troupe comes to Moscow. Its star attraction is the daring feat of a white American girl, who is catapulted from a gun-barrel. A Russian youth, himself a circus artiste, falls in love with the girl. Although it is evident to him that the girl too finds him attractive, he cannot understand why she shuns his company. At last, he can no longer restrain himself. He storms into her room only to find her breast-feeding a dark skinned baby! The cat is now out of the bag. In her home town in the United States, she had fallen in love with a Negro boy, whom she used to, meet secretly. Eventually, she finds herself pregnant. Afraid that the whites would kill her negro lover if they came to know of her ‘condition’, she runs away from home only to land in the clutches of a scoundrel who sells her to a circus owner,,,. Her Russian friend assures her that despite the baby, the progressive So-viet society would accept and honour both mother and child, since it is totally free from any colour prejudice. She leaves the American circus and they get married, and continue to work as a husband-and-wife team In a Russian circus troupe. The last scene, which is the highlight of the film, shows her dark son become the apple of the eye not only of her fellow troupers but of all Russia!

The film had a profound effect on my mind—so much so that, when I came out of the picture-house, I was in a world of my own, totally unmindful of the splinter of glass and stones flying about me—obviously the result of a bomb which had exploded in the neighbourhood! After seeing this film, I could not help contemplating the wide gap that separated the Russian

films from the American. The latter always portray man as a prisoner of circumstances. It is his weaknesses rather than innate strength that forms the themes of American; films. A couple of days later, I felt like seeing the film again. 'When I entered the auditorium, it had already started, so I could not see the people in my row. When at the end of the show the lights were switched on, I saw that the hall was packed with American negro soldiers. Looking at the expression on their faces, I felt a sense of kinship with them. Both of us being 'black men', our lot in our respective countries was alike.

Moreover, the overwhelming number in which those negro soldiers had come to see a 'Russian pro-paganda film came as a revelation" to me. I became convinced that 'propaganda' need not always be look-ed down upon. There could also be such a thing as honest and good 'propaganda'!

That picture-house on Tottenham Court Road now became for me a veritable haven, and the Russian films I saw there—amongst them such masterpieces as *Alexander Novasky*, *Battleship Potmakin*, *Baltic Deputy*, *Mother*, *Gorky's Life*, *Volga-Volga*—a source of inspiration, a sort of tonic which fortified my faith in humanity!

I began to take Interest in Soviet art; I wanted to know more about their films and their artistes. I read a number of books, analysing the technique and

philosophy of those films. I was pleasantly surmised to find that even eminent critics had hailed as master-pieces the very films which I had appreciated so much! Eisenstein and Pudovkin were now familiar names to me. I went wild over Cherkosoph's acting. Little did I then imagine that I myself would visit their country one day and that they in turn would see my *film -Do Bigha Zamin* or that I would have an opportunity to greet them with bouquets when they came to India!

It was thus the Russian films which introduced me to the Soviet Union and Marxism and Leninism. By then I had got disillusioned with American films, which I now found inferior to the Russian. I began to look forward to the day when I might visit the country which produced such excellent films!

I must, however, confess that I find the standard of the post-war Russian films considerably deteriorated—a view which is shared by the Russians themselves! They attribute this deterioration to the dictatorial regime of Stalin. It is, of course, they alone, who are in any position to say how far this claim is tenable! As for me, today's Russian films no longer leave on my mind that imprint which those of the pre-war days did. But then, here in

India, I do not get to see as many Russian films as I could during my stay in London. Hence, this assessment of mine may be wrong!

While studying Marxism, I also came across books written by Krishna Menon and Rajni Palme Dutt.

Gradually, I came to understand the rationale and the forces which led to a global conflict. I also realised that the Marxist-socialist doctrine had provided man with a new means to attain his full stature as a human being.

The Soviet Union was then in desperate straits. It was heroically defending Leningrad and Stalingrad, and the eyes of the whole world were riveted on these two cities. Our own country was groaning under imperialism, which had then reached its zenith.

The news from India was extremely distressing — Bengal was in the grip of famine and Gandhi and Nehru were behind bars.

Yet I felt that, in spite of all the injustices that were being heaped on our countrymen, it was with the forces of democracy and socialism alone that our national liberation movement must make common cause. It could never have anything to do with Hitler's barbaric fascism! Thanks to this conviction, my work on the B.B.C. acquired a new significance for me. I began to make special efforts to improve my Urdu and Hindi accents. I made friends with several English artistes, writers and intellectuals of the calibre of John Gielgud, T.S. Eliot, George Orwell, Harold Laski, Lionel Fielden, and Gilbert Hardinge. From them, I learned a lot that was beneficial to me. An additional plus point of my work was that well-known film and stage artistes from Europe and America would come to the B.B.C. to put on their plays and skits. I had the unique opportunity to watch at close quarters such celebrities as Bob Hope, Lawrence Olivier, Michael Redgrave, Babe Daniel, Vivien Leigh and several others. I could not fail to be impressed by their devotion to their profession. Whether it was a rehearsal or the broadcast proper, every one of them would arrive at the studio not a minute later than the appointed time. Moreover, they worked with a wonderful esprit *de corps*, completely free from any superiority or inferiority complex. Once before the transmitters, they would totally forget the world and become one with the parts they were playing. This was in sharp contrast to the slipshod manner in which the Indians worked. After observing the manner in which these foreign artistes worked, I became firmly convinced that the inspiration that drives an artiste to seek perfection is not a God-given gift. It is something he has to acquire through patient effort and application. It was, therefore, inevitable that while at the B.B.C. I should set myself higher goals in the

field of acting, and I spared no efforts to attain them. A reward awaited me when I returned to India. They told me, that quite a few of our plays broadcast from the B.B.C. were very much appreciated here.

The B.B.C. also taught me that it was wrong for an artiste to modulate his voice artificially. What mattered was not the tone of the voice, but the sentiment that it expressed. I am grateful to the English artistes for making me give up the idea that I should 'train' my voice!

As the tempo of the war increased, I began to think seriously about my personal life. Since, Dammo too was on the staff of the B.B.C., this applied to her as well. Between the two of us, however, it was she who used to broadcast more programmes. She was, moreover, a pioneer in introducing music programmes for the *jawans*. Her fan mail was also considerable. She even used to get food parcels—jam, paneer or tea—from far-flung places in Africa or Australia.

We became members of London's Unity Theatre and made it a point never to miss a good play or listen to a celebrated singer. By this time, we had acquired a fine sense of appreciation of the art of acting. Yet, even then, we had not given any thought to joining films. Day by day, however, our homesickness increased. We began eagerly to look forward to the day when we would return to India. Dammo had left our darling son Parikshat, who was then not quite one year old, with my mother. Mother had flatly refused to let us take our son to war-torn London. It was heart-rending to see Dammo pine for our child.

Shortly before we returned home, China had entered the war. For us on the B.B.C., this event proved to be of special significance, since a B.B.C. delegation was subsequently invited to tour China. On their return to England, the members of this delegation gave radio talks on their impressions of the China front. From these we learned that it was the communist forces of North China, which were providing the stiffest resistance to the Japanese. From China, our colleagues had sent despatches to the B.B.C. describing how, besides fighting the Japanese, the Chinese soldiers were also farming with their countrymen.

What was unique about these peasant-soldiers was that they also used to stage impromptu plays. Their themes dealt with the social and political implications of the war. These plays provided the village folk with entertainment as well as education. This experiment came to be known as 'People's Theatre'. Our delegates had also brought with them recordings of

Chinese music and excerpts from these plays, some of which we broadcast in English translations.

Both my wife and I found this idea of a People's Theatre very attractive. I felt that we, too, should start such a movement in our villages.

While I was at college, Norah Richard had once put on some plays, depicting vignettes of village life. I had seen how these plays used to exert a powerful effect on Rawalpindi's railway workers and their families. And, mind you, no drops or any other paraphernalia adorned the stage!

I would like to mention here an incident which happened at Shantiniketan and in which the great artist Nandlal Bose played the principal part.

One of our students at Shantiniketan had translated Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* into Hindi. I liked his translation so much that I decided to stage the play in the Hindi version. I went on merrily with the rehearsals without giving a thought to the technicalities of production proper. Indeed, I had no knowledge of them. As the fateful day when the play was to go on the stage approached, I was presented with a list of all the items that were required for its production. These included various types of uniforms, headgears and boots that the actors would don for their parts. Moreover, it was necessary to procure rifles, cartridges, slings, rucksacks, helmets and whatnot. I was simply flabbergasted. How was

I to collect all these odds and ends at so short a notice?

A colleague suggested that someone be despatched immediately to Calcutta to get these things on hire. But what about the hundred rupees that would be required for the man's railway fare? We had hardly ten rupees on us!

As luck would have it, the Maharajah of Tikamgarh, who was a great Hindi fan, was then on a visit to Shantiniketan and was staying at the Guest House on the campus. Without a moment's hesitation, I called on him and requested him to give us a donation of a hundred rupees. As was only to be expected, he readily agreed. I was, of course, totally unaware of the standing order of the university which strictly prohibited any student or member of the staff from accepting donations from visitors. When the rector got to know of my *faux pas*, he summoned me to his office and reprimanded me severely. He demanded that I return the amount forthwith. I was not prepared to take that lying down. I countered, 'Look, this is unfair. You don't want to help us yourself and yet you raise a hue and cry if we go and approach others for help. Do you want us to cancel our play?' The rector had no answer to this argument of mine.

Our interview ended on that note. I came out and told my colleagues that the play stood cancelled.

Later in the day, I was surprised to find 'Master Moshai' (Nandlal Bose) waiting for me outside the mess hall. As I came out, he called me aside and said gravely, 'I hear you have cancelled your play. Do you think you have done the right thing?'

'Yes, I do,' I answered.

'But this sort of thing is unheard of in Shantiniketan.'

I was rather peeved to hear him say that. I felt he too was making fun of my helplessness. I could not have been more wrong. He was humility itself when he said, 'Come along with me. We will go to the Kala Bhavan. I will see that you get all the things you require.'

Still I could not bring myself to believe him. Where was he going to get all those uniforms and guns from? I could not, of course, disobey so eminent an artist. I followed him in silence.

On reaching Kala Bhavan, I read out to him our list.

'What kind of uniforms do you want?' he asked, me.

'Any kind will do,' I answered. 'But the plot of that play is laid in Serbia. You must have the uniform and helmets of the Serbian army.'

Once again I had the feeling that he was pulling my leg.

'How do I know what the Serbian soldiers wear? Anything that looks like a uniform will serve my purpose,' I said a shade emphatically.

'Nothing doing. You shall have only the Serbian uniforms.' He pulled out a fat volume from a book-shelf and opened it at a page which showed pictures of Serbian soldiers and their officers in full uniform. I had now to concede that Master Moshai was not after all treating all this as a joke.

'See me after two days. I will keep all the things ready for you by then;'¹ he assured me, before we parted.

The same day, Master Moshai put all his students on the job which could only be described as 'operation *Arms and the Man*'. For two days they did nothing but 'create' helmets out of a mixture of cement and sand, or moulded paper pulp dexterously into army boots, anklets and guns. They coaxed every student on the campus into 'surrendering' his khaki raincoat which was then 'altered' to look like an army tunic. Sure enough; everything was ready in time and when we staged the play, Gurudev Tagore himself, who was in the first row, praised it to no end!

As I came out of the auditorium, Master Moshai was waiting for me outside. I went to him to say how grateful I was to him for taking all the trouble to enable us to put on our play. He smiled and said, 'I want you to remember one thing. Any fool can stage a play if he has a thousand rupees to spend on it. But only a true artiste can manage to stage it by spending just ten rupees.'

I remembered this incident, as also Nora Richard's experiment, when I read about the people's theatre movement in China. I mused: What a wonderful thing it would be if we too could start such a movement in our country!

Little did I then know that Khwaja Ahmed Abbas was at that very moment laying the foundation of just such a theatre in Bombay, while in Calcutta Shombbu Mitra and Binoy Roy were engaged on a similar venture or that eventually both Dammo and T would join them as fellow-artistes!

By the beginning of 1944, it was evident that Germany was going to be defeated. Maritime traffic between England and India was restored. In March of that year, we sailed for home. The B. B. C. management offered to give us certificates of recommendation but we declined them politely. A government job, even if it was on the radio, was the one thing we did not want to take up. Having lived in a free country, we had tasted freedom which we were bent on preserving at all cost. We had, however, no idea what we were going to do when we returned to India. We found ourselves thinking nostalgically about Shantiniketan, since we had very fond memories of the days spent there. We would have liked to go back there. But would they take us now?

Five

We disembarked at Bombay's Ballard Pier in April 1944. Everything—people, their dress, the atmosphere struck us as unfamiliar. If I were then asked whether I would like to live in Bombay permanently, I would have given an emphatic negative reply. I was nevertheless very happy to be back in India. In my exuberance, I threw away my suit and put on a dhoti (an apparel, I used to wear in Shantiniketan and Sevagram) on the very day of our return to India.

I even bought myself a *paan*, a delicacy I had not savoured for a long time. As I walked, to a lamp-post near a wall, to spit out the inevitable spittle, an advertisement posted on it caught my eye. It announced that Shantaram's film *Shakuntala* had come to a local cinema-house.

That advertisement evoked memories, very pleasant ones, of four years earlier when I had seen Shantaram's *Aadmi*. I had also seen its Marathi version *Manoos* in Poona, that most *Marathi* of Maharashtra's cities, I had gone there from Sevagram to attend the first conference of Hindustani Talimi Sangh. Appa-saheb Pant too was one of the delegates to the conference and we got to know each other. He had then lately come down from Oxford and had straight away joined the National Liberation movement, without a moment's hesitation. This was indeed a great sacrifice on his part, since he was heir to the *gadi* of a princely state—a fact, which made him rise in my esteem all the more. His house in Poona was straight out of the Peshwa era. I remember, one evening after he had entertained us to a sumptuous meal in his house, Appasaheb took me and Bharati Sarabhai to a show of the film *Manoos* which was then running at a cinema house, almost next door to his house. I can hardly describe the profound effect the film made on my mind. Even a New Theatres film had not been able to portray so faithfully the kind of milieu in which its story was set. While I sat watching that film, I felt as if I was physically walking the streets and bye lanes of Poona! Even the bathroom and the kitchen shown in that film were so authentic that they were exactly like those in Appasaheb's house!

I could hardly wait to get home and write a letter of appreciation to V. Shantaram. Much to my surprise, a reply came promptly—what intimidated me, however, was that the reply also carried an invitation to visit his studio!

-When I arrived there at the appointed hour, I found a gentleman waiting for me at the studio gate.

He took me into a room, asked me to make myself comfortable and left. There was another man in that room, whom I took to be a visitor like me. He wore a black cap, which in those days was *de rigueur* in Maharashtrian society. He was the first to break the ice. He asked me in English, 'You are Mr. Sahni, I presume?'

When I answered in the affirmative, he folded his hands and said, 'Namaste, I am Shantaram.'

I sat there speechless, staring at him. I was not prepared to believe that so modest a man could be a producer of films! True, Barua's life style too was unpretentious, but in his presence you felt rather more at home. The impression he created on you was that of a sophisticated man of the world. My host, on the other hand, might have been the headmaster of a primary school!

I carried my chair across the room and put it next to his. I told him how very deeply his film had impressed me. What he said in reply left me non-plussed. He said, he was not only familiar with my name but had also read several of my short stories. ‘You...you mean, you have actually read my stories?’ I managed to mutter.

‘Indeed, I have...We subscribe to ‘Huns’; ‘Vishal Bharat’ and many other Hindi periodicals. If you think a film could be made out of one of your own stories, do send it to us, even) if it should already be published: Alternately, if you come across a good story by any other author. I would like to read it. We want to make films based on the classics of our literature.’

From where I sat, I could see part of the studio premises, where a set had been erected. It was not a makeshift set, the like of which I had been in innumerable other studios, I had had enough of those rickety, wooden frames, held together by ropes and pieces of cloth. Here, on the other hand, was a real set, representing a city street flanked by three-storied houses. Built of solid brick and mortar, the houses were awaiting construction, of roofs over them. Those unfinished houses bore testimony to the meticulous care that went into the erection, of sets at the Prabhat Studio. No wonder then, that realism was the hall-mark of Prabhat films!

‘Would you like to go round the studio?’ Shantaram asked me. ‘I am not too keen on it, since I have already seen the New Theatres studio at Calcutta. All I wanted was the privilege of meeting you!’ I answered.

Sitting there in that studio room, I was reminded of the cultured and serene atmosphere at Shantiniketan and Sevagram. I felt guilty too at the thought that while the great man liked to me, more important and pressing studio matters must await the end of our meeting.

That was my first introduction to the Prabhat Studio and to V. Shantaram, the guiding spirit behind it. ‘

This meeting of four years ago with the versatile V. Shantaram was very much in my thoughts when I went to see *Shakuntala*. That a man of Shantaram’s calibre should be directing a film based on Kalidas’s classic drama was, I felt, a unique combination. You can well imagine then the high hopes I must have entertained, when I went to see that film.

But, Shantaram let me down badly, very badly indeed! At one stroke he shattered all the confidence and faith I had come to place in him, the supreme artiste! *Shakuntala* jarred on my nerves so very thoroughly that my soul cried out in anguish!

My disappointment was made all the more bitter because I consider *Abhijnyan Shahnantalām*—which I have read in the original—as a veritable treasure, wherein man's most delicate sentiments have found expression. And it was Shantaram, who, of all people, had to go and mutilate so priceless a work of art! As it was, the heat and dirt was already choking me to death. I now lost my appetite too!

I returned to Bombay the same evening. Next day, I ran into Chetan Anand at the Punjab National Bank on the Pherozeshah Mehta Road, where I had gone to withdraw money. A shared weakness for writing poems in English coupled with a passion for dramatics had made us close friends when we were students of the Government College, Lahore.

Chetan used to be a teacher in a Dehra Boon school, when I left for England. I was both surprised and pleased to meet him so unexpectedly in Bombay. Chetan told me he had left school mastering for a career in films, and that he was playing the lead in three or four films. (If I am not mistaken, it was opposite Chetan that Nargis made her debut as a heroine.)

The foyer of a bank was hardly the place to talk things over. Chetan, therefore, asked me and Dammo home for lunch the next day.

In those days Chetan used to live in a magnificent house on Bandra's Pali Hill. This beautiful district of Bombay had till then remained unknown to me. When I arrived there, I felt I had come to a hill station. The owner of the house, an Anglo-Indian youth, lived upstairs, Chetan told me that he was a happy-go-lucky fellow and was excessively fond of the good things of life. He had a host of friends, whom he would entertain at any odd hour. Throughout the time we were with Chetan, strains of dance music floated from his upstairs quarters and the wooden ceiling of Chetan's flat echoed to the sound of shuffling feet.

Vernon was the Anglo-Indian's name. When independence came after three years, he found him-self caught on the wrong foot. Unable to adapt himself to the changed circumstances and atmosphere, he sunk inevitably into penury—indeed so deeply that after a couple of years, there was nothing left for him but to become Chetan's chauffeur! Vernon, alas, is no more in this world. His son, Noel, however, has proved to be more adaptable than his father. He was assistant cameraman in Chetan's film *Haqeeqat*, and is on his way to becoming a full-fledged cameraman. His looks remain 'English', though I am very fond of that lad!

Chetan was full of news about the radical changes the war had brought about in the world of films. Besides producing films themselves, the owners

of film studios were also now letting out their studios to other producers and thereby earning more money. The demand for films had increased so much that the studios were working round the clock, with eight to ten films being shot simultaneously. The star system had come to stay, whereby the producers could hope to get money from the financiers, only if their films had 'marquee names'. The system worked greatly to the advantage of popular stars. Indeed, Saigal was then earning more than forty thousand rupees a month, which was about ten times more than what he did as a New Theatres' artiste.

I could not make head or tail of this 'system'. Nor have I understood it to this day. Nevertheless, it was gratifying to hear that now the 'genteel' society was not looking down upon the film profession, as it used to do in the pre-war days. Young men and women from the educated class were now taking up film careers. Writers of the calibre of Krishan Chander, Saadat Hasan Manto, Upendra Nath 'Ashq', Bhagwati Charan Varma, Josh Malihabadi and Sagar had now settled down in Bombay. As screen play and song writers, these men of letters, who hitherto were unable to earn a living by writing alone, were now earning in thousands.

Krishan Chander, too, was a friend of my college days, although he was a student of the F.C. College, while I had studied in the Government College. He himself had once told me that it was after reading my stories, that he had thought of trying his hand at writing. When I left for England, I had already made a name for myself as a short-story writer in Hindi, while Krishan Chander had still not quite arrived in Urdu. I learned from Chetan that in the years, Krishan Chander had written prolifically, *as a* result of which he was now rated as a leading Urdu litterateur. *Annadata*, his novel on the horrors of the Bengal famine, had taken the critics by storm.

I had not written anything during my four-year stay in England and yet I rather fancied myself a writer. It was a comforting thought to think that should everything else fail, I could always write for the films to earn a living! I had not then entertained any idea of becoming a film actor.

I was a mere onlooker, watching from outside the goings-on in the film world.

And here was Chetan, painting a rosy picture about the progress the films were making, but to me this progress was nowhere evident in that film of Shantaram's I had seen.

I said to Chetan, 'Look, you are welcome to your opinion but Shantaram's film certainly does not confirm it!' Chetan laughed and said, 'You must understand, it is a box-office film that Shantaram has made.'

Dammo and I merely stared at him in bewilderment. What was 'box office' and what had that to do with films? This ugly word, which we had not heard till then, was to confront me every day in later life 'Pray, what's a box-office film?' I asked.

'It's a film,'- Chetan explained, 'which, above all, manages to make money, no matter what its artistic review. That is the only criterion by which its success is judged nowadays. *Shakuntala* may have very little to commend itself artistically, but it has been a commercial success. It is breaking all box-office records.' 'But,' I countered, 'Shantaram's earlier films too have enjoyed long runs.'

'True, but their success does not amount to much in today's context. Moreover, films are now being produced in large numbers. The public taste too has changed. Filmgoers no longer wish to see serious, idealistic films with unhappy endings. They want light comedies, full of dance and song.'

'You mean, the New Theatres films did not entertain the people?'

'They did, of course. But it was only the educated middle class which could appreciate them. The masses, on the other hand, found them no; very en-tertaining. They were also bored with seeing the same type of films over and over again. Moreover, *the leit motif* of both the New Theatres and the Prabhat films was the tragic side of life. Their tempo was slow and their songs had languorous tunes. No doubt they had succeeded in elevating the film art to a higher plane, but one must also concede that they had never tackled the fundamental problems of our society with boldness. Thanks to the liberal dose of; sentimentality with which these films were brimming, they had become monotonous in the people's eyes. A Lahore producer took advantage of this state of affairs. He made a film, which was an amalgam of all the ingredients, which were sure to transplant the viewer to a dream World, where happiness reigned supreme. These were, catchy tunes based on popular folk-songs, beautiful girls, titillating dances, romance, playful banter and a dash of vulgarity and nudity. It was Pancholi Sahab's *Khazanchi*, which was the first film to be made from this amalgam, and this amalgam proved to be very heady! *Khazanchi* went on to become a super hit, and became a model for several other films, which followed in its wake. Prabhat and New Theatres' films became passé. Realising that times, and with them their demands, had changed, Shantaram severed his connection

with Prabhat and came to Bombay to become an independent producer. There was, however, only one way open to him whereby he could establish himself in his new role— to make a film which would meet the public demand. His choice thus inevitably fell on the story of *Shakuntala*, since it provided him with every opportunity to stuff it with all the popular ingredients, and moreover he could do so without bringing upon himself any discredit. It is true that injustice has been done to Kalidas, but then how many people have read the play in the original?’

‘I can’t say that .it is the right argument.’

‘I grant you that,’ Chetan said, ‘But one has also to consider the business aspect of this line. For his next film *Dr Kotnis*, however, Shantaram has chosen a theme after his heart. It is both realistic and pro-gressive. In fact, Shantaram has shown himself to be a shrewd and alert man. In my opinion, he deserves to be congratulated.’ ‘But don’t you think, once you have acted contrary to your conscience, it inevitably becomes weak?’ I asked.

‘Well’, Chetan replied with a smile, ‘idealism is rather at a discount in this line.’

When Chetan mentioned the film *Khazanchi*, Dam-mo had looked at me knowingly. That name brought back to us the memory of the day when the records of that film had arrived at our section in the B.B.C. On listening to them, everyone of our employees had made fun of their tunes, a hybrid of Indian and wes-tern music. One song, above all, had struck us as particularly unmelodious and silly. ‘*Panchhi ja*’

Peechhe raha hai bachpan mera...’

I remember, we had just stacked those records in an obscure corner. Indeed, we hadn’t the courage to play them, when our English colleagues were around. It was the beautiful music’ of R.C. Boral and Punkaj Mullick which ruled our hearts. We were infatuated with the voice of Saigal, Kanan Bala, K. C. Dey, and Uma Shashi. In fact, my reverence for Saigal had in-creased all the more during my stay in London. Every song, every gazal of his, revealed a hitherto un-known facet of beauty, which used to hold the listen-er spell-bound.

I had gone out of my way to got his records included in the B.B.C. Library. The English officials too shared my view that it was indeed music of a high order.

It was. however, the music of *Khazanchi* which proved to a trend-setter, in that we began receiving from India an unending procession of records whose tunes had unmistakable echoes of it. And it was these records

which the jawans now wanted played in the request programmes! Being so far away from India, we had looked upon this change in public taste as a passing phase, little realising that before long it was going to revolutionise film music!

‘What is it that has made you join films?’ I asked Chetan.

‘Aha!’ Chetan exclaimed. ‘Now, I call that a very original question. You know, I am not at all keen on acting. What I want to do is to make a realistic and purposeful film. I have decided to call it *Neecha Nagar*. I shall show in it the economic struggle waged by the different classes of our society and I am not going to make any compromise with the box-office. In fact, right now, I am working on its scenario.’

‘But,’ I said, ‘you yourself say that one has also to consider the business aspect of film-making. When even a director of Shantaram’s calibre has had to acknowledge this fact and make a compromise, how can you then afford to do without it?’

‘It is a challenge, Balraj, which this new situation has thrown to artistes like us, who have made a special study of the realistic school in literature and drama. This school too has a technique of its own and it does have a wide-ranging appeal. The people at large are always eager to see their life depicted realistically on the stage and screen. A film which is capable of doing it can, therefore, dispense with songs and dances.’

I fully agreed with what Chetan was saying. In-deed, I had had personal experience of the truth of his statement, while I was still an undergraduate at Lahore....! had then gone home to Rawalpindi in the summer vacation. One evening I went to see Shantaram’s *Duniya Na Mane* at the Rose Cinema. Since in those days Pindi was by no means a socially advanced town, I had expected the local populace to shun this film. I was, therefore, surprised to find the auditorium packed to capacity. The 5-anna and 10-anna seats were monopolised by those Pathans who were famous for their cruelty and fanaticism. There is a very moving scene in this film where Shanta Apte—who has been married off to an old fogey against her wishes—is shown reciting Longfellow’s poem.

Tell me not in mournful numbers

Life is but an empty dream...

It is a longish poem, which, considering that the majority of the audience had no knowledge of English, was bound to go over their heads. I was, therefore, afraid that they would rise from their seats to a man) and start shouting and whistling. But they proved me wrong. There was pin drop

silence throughout the recitation. Though the words were obviously unintelligible to them, they understood the sentiments *behind* them and I could see that they were visibly moved. Chetan was telling me, ‘You have now in the industry, independent producers...But then one need not *get* disheartened by the present uncertain conditions in the industry. If enlightened and progressive men came forward and produced realistic films, they could still make our film-makers conscious of their social responsibilities. But their failure to do so would leave the field open to those producers of cheap films who believe in entertainment for entertainment’s sake!’

We sat there eagerly listening to what Chetan had to say about the future of the film industry. We had, of course, and then no idea how far we ourselves would be able to share his enthusiasm. After all, we had only recently returned home after spending four years abroad, and, moreover the war had brought about a lot of changes in these four years. We were, therefore, going to have to renew a number of contacts, both with individuals and with institutions, to be once again a part of our national life. In! Bengal alone, twenty lakh people had died, pining for rice, their staple food, while in England, which did not produce rice, we could get it so easily! Such incidents do leave their imprint on your mind. However, the ‘one thing we wanted ‘to do before setting down was to go to Rawalpindi to meet members of our family. As the Pothohar hills hove in sight, we felt that now we had really arrived home! Little did we then realise that we were seeing our Watan for the last time or that the hour was at hand when we would be bidding good-bye, permanently, to Rawalpindi!

Six

After spending a few days at Pindi, we went to Kashmir for a holiday. We had a villa in Srinagar. One day we had an unexpected visitor, Chetan Anand, who of course stopped with us. He had come all that far to ask me and Dammo to play the leads in his *Neecha Nagar*, the spade work of which had been completed. By way of our fees, he was prepared to pay us 20,000 rupees. This figure was beyond our wildest imagination. Or was he perhaps pulling our leg?

From Srinagar I had written to Hazari Prasad Dwivedi—who was the head of the Hindi Bhavan at Shantiniketan—offering to go back to my old post there and he had replied to say that I would be welcome. Both Dammo and I were, in fact, eager to return to Shantiniketan and renew contact with

our friends and colleagues there. But now suddenly it was as if a new vista had opened up before us!

It was not easy to take a decision, one way or another. As for my father, he did not quite approve of our going back to Shantiniketan. He expected me to try for an executive post in All India Radio, which, he reckoned, would be more in the fitness of things, considering my experience on the B.B.C. He was, therefore, sure to raise a storm should he come to know that I was planning to become a film artiste and, moreover, I wanted my wife to become one too!

But then Chetan's offer was too tempting to spurn! Both Dammo. and I decided not to forego those twenty thousand. After all, one more leap in the dark was not going to make any great difference to our life pattern!

One evening during a stroll along the Jhelum embankment, Chetan told me the story of *Neecha Nagar*. Although the style of his narration left me unimpressed, I found the story gripping enough. In fact, I was reminded of those down-to-earth stories of Gorky and the stark realism of the Russian films. Indeed, some of the scenes Chetan described so graphically that they haunted my imagination several days thereafter. No doubt, it was a bold step that Chetan was contemplating, but to assist him in this venture could not be considered as wrong by any means!

Chetan went to Gulmarg to write the dialogues of the film, and a few days later the film took a definite shape.

By 20th December, we had to reach Poona, where the film was to be shot at the Navyug Studio. W.Z. Ahmed, that redoubtable film maker, was the producer of the film, while Chetan himself was going to direct it.

Chetan returned to Bombay by July end. Before he left, we informed him of our acceptance of his offer, although we had not divulged this secret of ours to our near ones.

During that sojourn in Kashmir, I managed to combine business with pleasure. I procured the pre-ceding four years' files of the Hindi periodical 'Hans' —which was then edited by Munshi Premchand's son Sripat Rai—and read them in between the treks through the valley, but of the countless articles I then read, I found two profoundly moving. One was *Antim Abhilasha*, the Hindi version of Bijen Bhattacharya's one-act play *Zabanbandi*, which drew a vivid picture of the travails of the country folk who flee their villages for Calcutta in the wake of the Great Bengal Famine. The other was Krishan Chander's great novel, *Annadata*.

It was with a renewed love for the motherland that I had returned home from England. In fact, I had decided never again to spend long periods in a foreign country, no matter how beautiful! This is not to say—that I was not proud of having spent four years in England. I have already mentioned that I have been bitten by this ‘wanderlust’ right from childhood, a childhood which was rather pampered considering that my parents were pining for a son after being blessed with five daughters in a row! Inevitably, therefore, I came to regard myself as a unique personality! I had grand visions of going out into the world and leaving a lasting impression on the sands of time! As a child I would spend hours in front of a mirror admiring my image!

But along with this narcissism, I had also developed a never-say-die tendency. To be sure, thanks to this determination to succeed at any cost, I had received several setbacks in life, which is of course part of the game. While nursing my wounds, I saw that life had not spared others either who, like me, had also wounds of their own to nurse! This experience taught me the virtues of humility and compassion towards one’s fellowmen.

This duel between individualism and collectivism has been going on in my mind for ages. It has been both a help and an impediment in my efforts to achieve progress. Almost all the artistes and men of letters of my generation have had to contend with this duel.

I often think that I am rather like that monkey who is afraid of the fire and yet can’t help playing with it! I want to be one with the masses and also to keep my self aloof from them. I want to contribute my mite to national development without, however, doing anything that would be detrimental to my interests. I have thus fallen between the two stools of individualism and collectivism.

My contemporaries too have been unable to resolve this dilemma. The younger generation will perhaps find fault with us and think us philistines.

I on my part, however, believe that this struggle within oneself also works positively to some extent.

On returning from England, I had begun to oppose openly British imperialism. Indeed, on one or two occasions, my friends reminded me of the Defence of India Rules. All the same, I was by no means ready to sacrifice everything and throw myself whole-heartedly into the struggle for Independence. This antagonism on my part was merely the result of my rejuvenated ego. What had happened was that my stay in England had boosted my confidence. I now considered myself in no way inferior to an Englishman. But as luck would have it, soon after returning to India, my ego

received a severe jolt. Before I left for England, I used to belong to that select band of Writers, whose articles, whatever they be, were never turned down by editors. My own stories had been regularly appearing in the magazine 'Huns'. In England, however, I had not written anything. But now I wanted to take up writing once again. I wrote a story and sent it to 'Hans'. It was promptly returned. My self-confidence was so badly battered that since then, I have not written one single story. It was eventually restored by Chetan's offer to act in his film. Come to think of it, my opting for a film career was also the result of that story being rejected.

My self-confidence received a further boost in the form of a letter from Krishan Chander, which was sent from Poona, where he was working as a screen-play writer on the staff of producer W - Z. Ahmed. He was full of praise for Ahmed, the man, and his progressive views. He then went on to suggest that I need not take Chetan's help to enter films. Ahmed Sahab would be very glad to have me on his staff.

This assurance from Krishan Chander went rather to my head. I never bothered to consider whether it was not perhaps out of a sense of friendship that he had written that letter! I came to the conclusion that Ahmed himself had got him to write it, and that he was trying to make me give up Chetan's friendship. 'What a despicable thing to do,' I thought.

Without acknowledging it, I forwarded the letter to Chetan. A second letter arrived from Krishan Chander. This too I sent to Chetan. Surprisingly though, Chetan had not written to me, since leaving for Bombay. In the meanwhile I had gone and told someone—I do not remember whom—that I was planning to join films. In no time, the news spread and everyone started giving me a 'special' look. In their eyes, I had already become a star. Father, too, came to hear of it. His first reaction was one of disapproval, but eventually he acquiesced, when he was told, I was going to get twenty thousand for that role. As for Dammo's joining the film, I kept it a close secret.

As that fateful September date drew nearer, I grew nervous. If that letter of Chetan's failed to arrive—what then? Have I perhaps put all my eggs in one basket and made a fool of myself?

At long last, after an agonising wait, Chetan's letter, arrived. It was, however, couched in ambiguous language. The letter did not say anything definite. Nor was there any trace of those twenty thousand. All that the letter said was that I should present myself at the Poona studio on the 20th!

The letter came as a bitter disappointment to my younger brother Bhishma. In view of its vague-ness, he strongly objected to my taking Dammo and the kids with me. The upshot of it was that I left for Poona alone.

It was a pleasant journey. In the monsoon weather, the Sahyadri Ghats looked all the more majestic and as the train approached Poona, the sylvan landscape revealed itself in all its glory and grandeur. It was as if I was back in England. No wonder then that the English carried with them such fond memories of Poona and remembered it with nostalgia on their retirement in England!

Krishan Chander had come to the station. I was his guest that night. I was in a quandary, since Krishan Chander made no mention of the two letters he had written to me. I was anxious to meet Chetan, who finally came in the morning at about 10 o'clock to take 'me to the studio.

I found the studio full of people, who however did not seem to know what they were expected to do. They either stood in groups or wandered about aimlessly in the studio premises. I ran into a few acquaintances there, one of whom was David Abraham. The last time I had met him was in Kashmir about six years ago. He was then Private Secretary to Enakshi Rama Rao and her husband Mr. Bhavnani, who had come to Kashmir to shoot their film *Himalay ki Beti*.

Since it was perhaps the first Hindi film to be shot in Kashmir, it would not be out of place here to describe at some length the circumstances attending its shooting.

I was in those days a lecturer at Shantiniketan, Dammo had made friends with Enakshi Rama Rao, when the latter had come to Shantiniketan to dance before Gurudev Tagore. Dammo happened to mention to her friend that we had a villa in Kashmir, where we spent our summer holidays. Enakshi had said she would meet her there, since her husband was planning to shoot a film in Srinagar and that she herself was acting in it.'

Kashmir was then under the rule of Maharaja Hari Singh and there were all manner of restrictions on the entry of visitors to the valley. A permit from the Dewan of the state was necessary to shoot a film. I procured this and sent it to Bhavnani, who arrived two weeks later at Srinagar with his party. For the first couple of days, David and the Bhavnanis were our guests. That was the beginning of my friendship with David, who like me had only recently finished his university education. Moreover, he shared my passion for the novels of P.G. Wodehouse. One early morning, while on a boating trip

through the Dal Lake in the company of my friends, I spotted Bhavnani's unit near the Gagri Bal wall, getting ready for shooting. We decided to watch the *tamasha*. Anchoring our sailing boat at the quayside, we stepped on land. They told us, they wanted to film a boy jumping into the lake from the wall. Not only was the wall quite high, but the water there was also not very deep and moreover it was full of rocks. I went to Bhavnani and warned him of the risk involved in taking that shot but he gave me such a look of contempt as if I was a total stranger to him! We went back to our boat and set sail.

When after an hour, we were passing that spot on our way home, we saw quite a crowd at the Gagri Bal turning. On making enquiries, we came to know that the poor lad had broken his leg by jump-ing off that wall! How callous of Bhavnani! I was disgusted with the fellow! I, of course, did not know then that the life of an 'extra' amounts to just nothing in the film industry! David had then reached stardom. He was being paid ten thousand rupees for a role, and he had in his bag about fifteen contracts!

In the studio premises, I met Shyam, who too was slated to die in an accident while on location shooting. He was a fellow Rawalpindian, and our two families were very close to each other. Though he was not yet a star, he was soon to become one. He had been cast opposite Nina in two of Ahmed Sahab's films.

Another artiste I met there was Karan Dewan, who had won countrywide acclaim after the release of the film *Ratan*. His elder brother was a friend of mine and, as undergraduates at Lahore, we used to stage plays together. Hamid Butt was also there, whom I had met once in Lucknow. I remembered him for his melodious voice.

No one appeared to be in a hurry. I had been talking to these friends of mine for hours and still nothing happened. Being a novice, I had, of course, then no idea that things always move at a snail's pace in this profession, and that every film man has to get used to it!

At long last, someone from the studio office appeared and said to us, 'Please go into the make-up room. You are going to be photographed first; Sahab (W.Z. Ahmed) will then see you at two o'clock.'

It was a small room, where I sat in front of the make-up man. In no time, he literally transformed my face, so that it now looked more youthful and attractive. I paid him a handsome compliment, which, however, he accepted with a derisive smile. 'Making-up faces' was after all his job!

Make-up over, we were duly photographed. It was now time for Ahmed Sahab to send for us. But we waited and waited, all through the afternoon. It was past 5 o'clock and still no word came from Ahmed Sahab's office.

I had newly arrived from England, where even the King-Emperor himself dare not keep anyone waiting for more than ten minutes.

How then, could I put up with such an insult? All the castles I had built in the air started collapsing. Krishan Chander's letter had led me to believe that Ahmed Sahab would be waiting for me at the studio-gate with a garland in his hand! And here I was cooling my heels, hat in hand, in a queue of job-seekers! I found it particularly galling that David, Tiwari and a few other friends should be witness to this humiliation of mine. For the umpteenth time I said to Chetan, 'Let's get out of here,' but he would not listen. Being wise in the ways of the film line, he knew there was no other go but to wait, and he did not seem to mind it. I had second thoughts, after a while. It was all very well for me to say, let's quit, but where would I go? Back to Srinagar...and then lose face? I was angry with myself for having travelled so far, all on my own, without waiting for a definite promise in black and white. I must blame only myself for landing in this hopeless situation! All the same, when it comes to defending my honour, I make no compromises. I decided not to mince words in, my interview with Ahmed Sahab.

It was six o'clock when finally I received word that Ahmed Sahab was now free to see me. When I went in, I found him studying my photographs, which had been taken in the morning. He was wearing dark glasses.

No sooner was I seated than he puffed deeply at his cigar and placed before me the photographs. One of these—I must say, it did me full justice—he took from me and eyed it for a few minutes. 'Very nice, indeed!' he remarked.

In reply, I said, it was all due to the skill of his make-up man. That brought to his face the kind of derisive smile, which I had seen on the make-up man's face. He passed a typed sheet of paper across the table to me and said, 'Look, I do not intend taking up Chetan Sahab's picture right, now. I want to do the *Mahabharat* first, with Chetan Sahab as Krishna and you as Arjun. I shall pay fifteen hundred rupees to Chetan Sahab and a thousand to you. If this is acceptable to you, please sign on the contract!

I could not care less what the salary was. In fact, my job in England was fetching me thrice that amount., In a huff, I said, 'I was expecting you to apologize to me for having kept me waiting for four hours, before going into

the details of salary. In any case, I have absolutely no intention of playing Arjun. Moreover, I would like to make it clear, that I have come here with the sole object of acting in Chetan's picture.'

Ahmed Sahab just sat there, without saying anything. Presently, Nina came into the room and sat on the sofa. By her very presence, she seemed to enliven the room. Ahmed Sahab softened and became less formal. He said 'Sahni Sahab, I wanted your photographs in my hand before the interview started. I know, you have been put to great inconvenience. It is all because our man took ages develop-ing those negatives. You know, Nina, Sahni Sahab would be an ideal choice to play Arjun', but he does not quite like the idea of acting in a religious film., Anyway, there is no hurry, Sahni Sahab, He assured me, 'You can take your own time deciding about it. Mind you, this religious film of ours is not going to be a conventional one. I am sure, you will approve of the technique we are going to employ.' 'That's all very well, but I cannot change my decision. Good bye,' so saying I walked out of his room.

Chetan was not in the ante-room, where I thought he would be waiting for me. Perhaps there was another door to Ahmed Sahab's room, through which Chetan might have entered his office!

The studio had a garden of its own, where I saw Hamid Butt, Mohsin Abdullah, Tiwari and David. I joined them and we spent a considerable time strolling in the garden.

When finally Chetan emerged, it was from the same door I had come out of. I eyed him questioningly.

He blurted out, rather defensively, 'Look, I have signed the contract!' I was nonplussed.

'For your sake, I turned down that contract, and now you have gone and signed it!'

Obviously, Ahmed Sahab had kept from Chetan the news of my refusal to sign the contract. A self-respecting and upright person that he is, he went right back to Ahmed Sahab's room and demanded that his contract be torn! "

Although he did not actually tear the contract, Ahmed Sahab, however, promised Chetan that he would not force him to play the role.

Next morning, the three of us—Chetan, I and Hamid Butt, who also like us had withdrawn his contract, returned to Bombay by the Deccan Queen.

W. Z. Ahmed-and Nina are now in Pakistan. ‘The other day, when I was in Lahore, I met both of them at the house of Imtiaz Ali Taj. It was a very cordial reunion. Come to think of it now, Ahmed Sahab had, in fact, meant to help me that day.

Which other producer would have offered to engage a novice on a salary of a thousand rupees?

Seven

No amount of praise can do adequate justice to Chetan for being so magnanimous to me. Just to keep his word to a friend, he let go a good offer! Any other man in his place would have looked to his own interests first! Indeed, Chetan went a step further and took upon himself the responsibility of looking after me and my family! Later, when Father and Mother got to hear—I don’t know how—that Dammo too was planning to join films, they were greatly distressed. Eventually, the atmosphere in the house got so un-bearable for Dammo that she was left with only one course—take the train to Bombay with the children! Parikshat was then four years of age, while Shabnam was a tiny tot of ten months. Chetan’s flat on Pali Hill became our home in Bombay. We are a ‘joint family’—Chetan. and his wife Uma in one room, in the other his two brothers, Dev (Dev Anand) and Goldie (Vijay), and in the third I, Dammo and the kids, while Hamid Butt and his wife Azra Mumtaz had made themselves comfortable in the drawing-room!

Dammo, of course, used to feel embarrassed that we should have thus planted ourselves on the Anands and that as mistress of the house; Uma had to see to our needs and comfort. But then we we’re all young and rather enjoyed putting up with inconveniences. As for Uma, she was always full of *joie de vivre*. She took it all as a lark, as if we were all on a jolly picnic!

I now live in a house of my own. It has ten rooms to accommodate the five members of my family and each one of them has a car of his own. But much of the zest has now gone, that zest we then felt for life! And perhaps Chetan, Dev and Vijay too will share this view, all of whom are now enjoying a standard of life much higher than mine.

In the Anand household, our day would start with breakfast. Chetan and I then went downtown to Bombay. The India Coffee House neap the Flora Fountain used to be our HQ. It was a very romantic place in those days. There you ran into artistes of all hues, writers, journalists, painters, dancers and what have you! The occupants of the next table might be spiritedly

defending the Congress policies, while the one in front of you was likely to be a communist or a socialist stronghold! Naturally, all these budding geniuses were accompanied by their girl-friends, who hung on every word they uttered! The whole atmosphere in that cafe used to be charged with emotion and you felt a mood of expectancy in the air. Indeed, we were then living- through extraordinary times. The world war was on its last legs, eminent statesmen were engaged in drafting the constitution of the UNO and at home, the Ganddi-Jinnah parleys were to start soon. .

Invariably, Chetan's table would attract the more interesting personalities from that crowd, turning it into a sort of 'central table'. Chetan seemed to command a good deal of respect from the enlightened sections of society. At his table, one met Bharati Sarabhai come to ask him to direct the play she had written or Raja Rao was likely to drop in to seek his advice on some aspect of the plot of the novel he was then writing. There would be Ram Gopal offering to take him to London. In the midst of all this, he might be suddenly called to the telephone. The manager would send word that a Mr. Pasta or Hiten Chowdhary was on the line.

Hearing those magic names, we would all rush to the telephone. Perhaps Mr. Pasta or Mr. Chowdhary had brought the glad news that he had been successful in arranging finance for *Neecha Nagar*, a film which was going to be devoid of any box-office trappings! Since both these men had contacts with financiers, who were also intellectuals, our hopes used to rise skyhigh!

Afternoons, we spent climbing the staircases of posh buildings in the Fort to knock on the doors of the financiers' offices. In the evenings, the stair-cases we climbed led us to the dingy pedhis-of *sethias* in the Kalbadevi or Grant Road area. The only thing that these gentlemen understood was, of course, how much profit they were likely to make from a film!

With the war not yet over, distribution of raw film was severely restricted. It was supplied to only those producers who had licences. Since these licences fetched in the black market anything between one and one and a half lakh rupees each, they were in great demand and people resorted to all sorts of tricks to procure them. This meant in effect that one who managed to get a licence could well afford to make a film, without any big stars. Moreover, if the film went on to become a box-office success, his profits were likely to increase two to threefold. At least, that was what Chetan had reckoned with, and had made his plans accordingly. It was obvious to me that Chetan could have solved all his problems by the simple process of dropping me and Dammo in favour of more experienced stars for his film.-

But no. He considered himself duty-bound to keep his promise to me, his friend.

With each passing day, my savings were getting eroded. Whatever money I had brought from England was vanishing rapidly. As for getting any money from home, that was simply out of the question. What was, however, unbearable was sitting idly at home. How to kill time had become a problem for me! Film Director Phani Majumdar was a neighbour of Chetan's on Pali Hill. He had won acclaim as the maker of those New Theatres classics, *Kapal Kundala* and *Doctor*. He had now settled in Bombay, where he was counted amongst the top directors. Apparently, Chetan had gone and recommended my name to him. Thanks to this timely help, I received an invitation from Majumdar to see him at his Dadar office.

Dadar Main Road used to be Bombay's Hollywood in those days. All the well-known studios, Shri Sound, Ranjit, Amar, Minerva, Kardar, and Raj Kamal were located in its vicinity.

Consequently, the offices of the film producers too were to be found there.

All that however has changed now. The studios and their offices are now scattered all over the city. Their 'looks' as well as those of the artistes have also changed beyond recognition. Then you could spot a film actor unerringly, as soon as you arrived at Dadar. He gave himself away by his flowing hair, long side-whiskers, a trim moustache and a flamboyant gait!

The Dadar I am talking about is now no more. Prohibition has changed its topography. In those days, as you stepped out of Dadar station, you saw the Dadar Bar across the street. It was a favourite haunt of film producers' directors and actors. I have no doubt that at some time in their distinguished careers, Saigal, Chandramohan, Motilal and Ishwarlal must have frequented it. On one or two occasions, I too had, enjoyed its hospitality and admired myself in those full length mirrors which adorned its walls! If I remember right, Zia Sarhadi used to give me company and we would clink glasses together. Its patrons came from different strata of society and, once within its portals, they got into the spirit of bonhomie that pervaded the *maikhana*. This was possible because in those days there was not that great disparity between people's incomes, which you have now. Indeed, it was the sort of place which draws caustic comments from religious preachers in their sermons. Today's producers, however, would think it *infra dig* to visit such a place!

Walking past the Dadar Bar, I arrived at 'Coronation Mansion', where Phani Majumdar had his office. He was seated at his large table, from where he beckoned me to sit on the sofa opposite. He looked about my age, perhaps a couple of years younger. His was a typically Bengali face, soft and serene. There were a few other persons in that room and while talking to them, Phani Majumdar kept on eyeing me critically which rather disconcerted me. That gaze of his left me in two minds. I could not quite fathom whether it conveyed approval or disapproval.

Or was he perhaps seeing some hidden talent in me? I found the thought comforting. It encouraged me to take an optimistic view and try to make myself acceptable to him.

Presently, his other visitors took their leave. They had probably guessed that Phani Da (He was Phani Da to everyone in the film line) wanted to talk to me alone; or had they read this message in a slight jerk of their master's head? It could be so. The office of a successful producer is like a durbar of a king. A snapping of the fingers, and lo! his 'courtiers' disappear.

Phani Da was now free to talk to me. He had wonderful news for me. Starting with a small role in his film Justice which he was then directing, he was going to offer me an important role in his next film and after that nothing less than a hero's role!

I thanked him profusely and came home in high spirits. With so many contracts already in my pocket, I could now really call myself a film actor!

Chetan enquired, 'And what about money? Did he say how much he was going to pay you?'

'No.'

'But, you should have asked him that.'

'How could I? He offered me three contracts in a row.'

Chetan did not say anything. He must have guessed that I had lowered my sights.

I had imagined, they would ask me to go before the cameras right away. Days turned into weeks and yet nothing happened. Neither money nor the prospect of reporting for work was anywhere in sight. That, however, did not in any way lessen my obsession with the word 'shooting' so much so that I would not even get a haircut, unless I got an O.K. from Phani Da. I had heard people say that if an actor went and got the wrong type of haircut, this resulted in a 'jump' in the 'continuity'. I had, of course, no idea what those words meant. All the *sapne*, I did not want to do anything that was likely to

harm my art. I told myself, You never know, they might call you for shooting tomorrow; and then, if you had the wrong type of hair cut ...

A new recruit to films always labours under such ridiculous delusions. He will wash his face with soap and water till it practically glistens. He will spend hours striking grandiose poses in front of a mirror. Little does the fellow know that the art of acting has more to do with a proper understanding of the role (which naturally requires the artiste to think) than these outward trappings.

A few days later, I happened to read in a newspaper an advertisement announcing a play, which 'the People's Theatre' was going to put on. I knew there was a 'People's Theatre' in China; was there one in India too? I was curious to know, so I asked Chetan. But I drew a blank. That evening I ran into V. P. Sathe, the well-known journalist, in the office of B. P. Samant & Co. When I asked him if he knew anything about a People's Theatre in Bombay, he answered, 'You bet I do. I am one of its members. In fact, I am right now on my way to attend its meeting, where Khwaja Ahmed Abbas is going to read his play. Come along, if you care for that sort of thing.'

At my instance, Chetan too accompanied us.

Sathe took us to the Deodhar School of Music, which occupied part of a floor of a building in a lane off Opera House. The School conducted its activities in a small hall, with a stage of sorts in one of its corners. It was here that every evening, members of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) met to discuss and make plans.

When we arrived there, we found about twenty young¹ men and women in that hall. Abbas was about to start his recitation. I had then only a nodding acquaintance with Abbas. While in London, I had read some of his Urdu short stories; we had, however, never been introduced. Abbas shook hands with us all, without rising from his seat and began reading the first act. One cannot really judge a play from its first reading. As for Abbas's play, I found, it devoid of any dramatic content. It did not appear to raise any fundamental issue either. I was still musing over this when Abbas made a startling announcement.

'Friends and comrades', he said, 'I am happy to find Balraj Sahni amongst us today. I am now going to entrust this play to him and request him to direct it!'

All I could do was to stare at him in utter disbelief. It would have been however foolish on my part to turn down the offer, since it offered me

something which could keep me occupied. I had had enough of sitting idle at home!

Thus it was that life opened up for me a new vista, which has left a permanent imprint on my personality. Even today I take pride in calling myself an IPTA man.

Later that evening, I joined the IPTA artistes and all of us went to see the play, Ma, It was the frame play, whose advertisement I had seen in the news-paper that morning. It was the Hindi version of a Marathi play and it had been produced by Mama Warerkar.

Not that the play itself was bad. All the same, I was thoroughly disappointed with the way it was presented. The Hindi accent of the artistes had strong overtones of their respective mother tongues— Marathi, Gujarati or Tamil. I must say, it jarred on my ears. I myself had taken great pains to rid my Hindi of my native Punjabi accent, when I was working on the radio. It is my firm belief that an artiste must be thoroughly familiar with the language, in which he is going to deliver his lines. Only a few from amongst the artistes of Ma had come up to my expectations. If these were going to be the artistes I was expected to direct in *Zubeida*... my heart sank at the thought!

I spent a sleepless night. The more I thought over this first directorial assignment of mine, the more nervous I became. I was sure that if I had to direct those artistes, the play was bound to end in a fiasco! Had I better refuse the assignment? But then, that would mean going back to climbing those staircases to knock on the doors of the financiers' offices...I racked and racked my brains.

Finally I came to the conclusion that I could resolve this dilemma only by making a clean breast of my predicament to the IPTA unit. The following evening I went to the IPTA office and told the members in no uncertain terms that I would brook no interference from anyone in the choice of artistes, or any other matter connected with the staging of the play. Abbas did not seem to like the matter-of-fact language in which I put forward my conditions. But a slim young man from the assemblage said, 'We accept all your conditions.'

He was Jaswant Thakkar, who in the next twenty years went on to render yeoman service to the Gujarati stage. Thanks to his untiring efforts, all the universities in Saurashtra now offer courses in Dramatics leading up to B.A. degree. He was, I believe, the secretary of IPTA, when I met him that evening.

I was now free to pick and choose the artistes I wanted for the play. For the male lead, my choice fell on Chetan, who acceded to my request readily. Dev Anand too gladly accepted the part of the hero's younger brother. Azra was to play Zubeida. The list of the dramatis personae, however, was pretty long, with the number of minor roles running into over thirty. Now that I had had my say in the selection of the leading players, I gave the IPTA members a free hand to pick the others.

I had no idea what had made Abbas entrust his play to me. As for my experience, it did not extend beyond directing a few plays, first at the university and later at Shantiniketan. Even today I have no knowledge of the technical aspects of play-direction, which I consider to be a blot on my career. I was all along conscious of this shortcoming of mine, while conducting the rehearsals. After all, qualities like self-confidence and bravery are not God-given gifts.

For example, the bewilderment of a country lad on his first visit to a city comes not so much from the strange environment he finds himself in as from his ignorance of the ways of the townsfolk.

It is knowledge alone which gives man self-confidence. Lack of knowledge is a very dangerous thing since you never know when it may let you down and thus rob you of your self-confidence and of that sense of discernment which enables you to take the right decision.

It was, in fact, to hide my ignorance of stagecraft that I had directed all my attention to the choice of the cast. I reckoned that if I got seasoned artistes to play the leading roles, they would keep the audience so spell-bound, that they would have no time to notice any faults in my direction.

Mir Sahab, Mirza, Munshi Bedil and Seth Sahab were the more colourful characters of the play. I wanted Abbas himself to play Mir's role. Not even in his wildest dream had he ever imagined that he would be called upon to go on stage but eventually I managed to break down his resistance. I had my most fascinating experience, however, when looking for someone who could do justice to the part of Munshi Bedil.

The scene is India Coffee House. I see Chetan talking to a thin, short-statured man. I look at him, wide-eyed. The man is an exact replica of Munshi Bedil. 'I must have this man to play Bedil,' I tell myself.

I drew a chair and joined them. Coming straight to the point, I invited him to play that part. But the man—Rashid Khan of *Garam Coat*, *Anuradha* and several other films—would have nothing to do with it. 'Look', he told me, 'acting in films or plays is the last thing I want to do now. I am not going to

let them ruin me once again. My job on the Radio fetches me two meals a day and they mean more to me than anything else in life. No sir, I am not going to risk losing my job for the sake of any acting role!

‘But,’ I tried to plead with him, ‘How is acting in a play like ours going to put your job in jeopardy? Our other artistes too have jobs!’

‘Well, I don’t know about them.’

‘Listen, now that I have met you, I can’t possibly bring myself to engage anyone else for that role. Tell me, what am I to do now?’

‘I’ll tell you what’, he said, without batting an eye-lid, ‘Go to hell! and so saying, he stalked out of the cafe!

Two months passed, during which the rehearsals went on merrily, while I waited for Rashid to relent. I wasn’t yet prepared to concede defeat. I took to waiting for Rashid in the Visitors’ “Room of the Radio Station. As soon as I saw him, I would beg of him to join our troupe. More often than not, he would threaten to call the police. Indeed; a couple of times he had me turned out of his room by a *chaprasi*! Still I did not lose patience. I could, of course, have got someone higher up in the radio hierarchy to make him act in our play but I did not consider that proper. (Having worked with the B. B. C., I had good contacts in All India Radio.)

Inevitably; the rehearsals started floundering; with one part still unfilled. I had a feeling that Abbas and my other colleagues were having misgivings about my competence as a director. I would give evasive re-plies to Jaswant Thakkar’s queries about sets; drops and lighting. On some pretext or other, Sathe and Abbas would invite Prithviraj Kapoor, Jairaj or K. N. Singh to watch the rehearsals, which was an indirect hint to me to seek their guidance. I knew for certain, that any evidence of diffidence on my part at this stage would ruin the play irredeemably. I, therefore, put on a bold front and” reminded them of my condition that I would not tolerate any interference in my work. This announcement of mine made my colleagues all the more apprehensive.

Jaswant Thakkar was the one man who did not let me feel small. In fact, he alone was in any position to understand my difficulties. He always arrived at the hall well in advance of the time of the rehearsal, to see that everything was in order. His sympathetic attitude was a great solace to me, and I came to enjoy his company. Eventually, I realised that with him around, I had no cause to worry about the technical aspects of stagecraft. He would take care of that.

One afternoon as the members of our troupe were ‘relaxing over a cup of tea in an Irani cafe, I let my imagination run wild. I said, ‘Why not have the bridegroom ride a real horse to the accompaniment of a Shehnai in that wedding scene?’

I was expecting Jaswant to make fun of this novel idea of mine, but he found it utterly fascinating. Despite my protestations, he went ahead with formalities that were necessary to put it into effect. The Municipal authorities, however, flatly refused to let an animal enter the Cowasji Jehangir Hall, which was under its jurisdiction. But that did not deter our friend. He proved more than a match for those bureaucrats. He got hold of a lawyer who dug into old records and came up with some document which said that in the year 1822 a monkey had been brought on the stage of this hall. That clinched the issue in our favour. Surely what goes for a monkey must also go for a horse!

Jaswant was a most flamboyant personality of the IPTA unit. He was so unconventional, his friends used to call him a ‘mad cap’, and he did not appear to mind it nor ‘a colleague of his’ sharing that epithet with him!

Before long, we became thick friends. Jaswant knew every nook and corner of Bombay. It was he who made me familiar with that city. He took me to plays and introduced me to people worth knowing. Our friendship did not go unnoticed by Abbas and the other members of the IPTA unit. They assumed Jaswant had converted me to communism!

As for me, I did not care as to what people thought about our friendship, or whether Jaswant was indeed a communist. In fact, he never once discussed politics with me. All that mattered to me was his friendship. I was not interested in his political leanings, nor in the rumours, which often came to my ears, that there were groups within the IPTA and that it was the communist group which called the tune. My whole mind was then on my play, beyond which the world did not exist for me.

I found that my familiarity with English literature proved a great help to me in picking the cast of *Zubeida*—so did the teachings of an eminent drama-critic like Ahmed Shah Bukhari and the knowledge that I had gained of stagecraft by being a regular theatregoer during my stay in London. *Zubeida* had now become for me a holy mission. I had no time to go into its merits or demerits as a play. It is my firm belief that if a director wants to assess the worth of a play, he should do so before he decides to direct it. Once he has got down to the rehearsals, he should never view a play from the technical angle. A director must never use a play to parade his own

artistic skill. His job is to interpret the theme of the play in a way that would conform to the playwright's ideas. It is wrong for a director to cut and chop a play without the author's approval.

There were a number of loose ends in Abbas's play, to which my colleagues often drew my attention. But before mentioning these to Abbas, I would read the relevant lines once again. More often than not, I found the answers to these 'loose ends' in the play itself! I never fail to be amazed at the versatility of Abbas, the writer. He manages to infuse his plays with that unique touch, all his own which I have rarely come across in the writings of the Hindi-Urdu playwrights. If only Abbas had devoted more attention to this flair of his! In any case, Abbas's plays have enough 'situations' which allow full play to a director's imagination!

By the time I arrived at the hall the rehearsals, I would have in my mind a clear picture of each of the characters, complete with their' idiosyncrasies. Consequently, I could make them more lively and colourful.

Novice that I was at my job, I would also some-times make bloomers. Apparently, in a fit of temper I had once admonished Dev Anand with the words, 'Take it from me, you will never become an actor.' I may have said that but have totally forgotten the incident now. What, however, I have not forgotten is the fact that it was I who was instrumental in sending Dev to Poona without Chetan's knowledge, when the former received a call for an interview from the Prabhat Studios. I remember, I had im-pressed upon Dev, the desirability of accepting an offer from a studio like Prabhat, no matter how harsh the conditions of the contract. I can thus claim part of the credit for making Dev take up a film career. And yet the film journalists had shouted themselves hoarse at that time about something I had said inadvertently. The remark had also rankled in Dev's memory!

Although on innumerable occasions in the past, I myself have been guilty of running down my colleagues, I now realise that a director must never" do that. He must always hold himself in check. The memory of those lapses is very painful to me now. Obviously, my ill temper must be attributed to my ignorance.

The premiere of our play was just four days away and still the fate of Munshi Bedil continued to hang in balance. Rashid Khan was as adamant as ever and so was I. But, after all, Rashid was an artiste. It was not very long before he took pity on a fellow-artiste and gave in. But how was he going to learn his lines in so short a time? Here Munshi Bedil's passion for newspapers came in handy. In no scene had Abbas shown him without

holding a newspaper in his hand. All that Rashid had to do then was to read his lines off a sheet of paper, which could be easily hidden between the pages of his 'newspaper'. The stratagem worked so successfully that none from the audience noticed this 'irregularity'. On the contrary, much of the success and popularity of *Zubeida* was due to the aplomb with which Rashid played Munshi Bedi. Indeed, he was praised so much that the poor fellow had to give up his job on the radio and go back to films and the theatre.

Came the day of the premiere and still the play had not become a 'finished product'. As if this were not enough, Chetan, the hero of the play, had a sudden attack of asthma, minutes before the curtain was to rise. In record time, I put on make-up and stepped into his shoes. Since I knew the entire play by heart, I managed to put on a fairly plausible performance. As luck would have it, I had invited my younger brother Bhishma to Bombay for the premiere. He too contributed to it substantially, in that he played three different minor roles. In one of the scenes, he had to play a municipal employee, whose job it was to see to street lighting. When he appears on the stage, he finds Mir Sahab, Mirza, Seth Sahab and Munshi Bedil seated under a lamp-post, gossip-ing. He and Munshi Bedil get to talking. Neither Bhishma nor Rashid had any idea what the script re-quired them to say, so they just said whatever came into their heads. This improvisation turned out to be so natural that it became part of the play, replacing the original conversation as written by Abbas. In spite of the numerous obstacles the play had to encounter, it proved to be a resounding success, which far exceeded our expectations. And when the bride-groom came riding on a 'live' horse, to the accompaniment of a band, the entire hall reverberated to a deafening applause!

Eight

At last, the long awaited moment arrived. I was to report at the Kardar Studio at 7.00 p.m. I remember the day vividly. I was in the midst of an IPTA meeting, when the studio man called there to convey to me the glad tidings. The moment my colleagues heard the magic word 'shooting', a look of envy came into their eyes. Leaving the meeting, I rushed to Charni Road Station to catch an Andheri local.

This word 'shooting' holds a strange fascination for our people. An artiste who is on way to a studio for 'shooting' immediately rises in his friends' esteem. Indeed, the one question an actor dreads most is, 'Don't you have

shooting today?’ He wonders whether the question does not perhaps portend an unsavoury future!

Although I had been asked to be present at the studio at 7 p.m, they told me the shift would start only at 9 o’clock. I waited there wondering why they had called me so early. Eight o’clock, and still there was no trace of any activity. But I did not let that bother me. I was far too dazzled by the prospect of facing the cameras for the first time in life! Actually, this kind of insulting treatment is purposely meted out to a ‘small’ actor with a view to cutting him down to size. Established stars are, of course, not bound by such petty things as time schedules. They might arrive at the studio any time between three and four hours late! No matter how long they have been kept waiting; the moment the great star arrives at the studio, the producer and the director of the film — and naturally the smaller fry also — are all smiles to receive him. This business of kowtowing to the stars no doubt erodes their self-respect, which they invariably recover by taking it out on the minor artistes, who, of course, must suffer the undeserved humiliation in silence, if they wish to keep their jobs! A minor artiste, however, does sometimes manage to turn the tables, that is, if at all he is lucky enough to rise to ‘stardom’! But then once he has ‘arrived’, he, in his turn, thinks it *infra dig* to bother about those in the ‘ranks’!

The set was erected in the studio premises. It represented the patio and the garden of a rich man’s villa. It was getting on to half past nine, when Phani Da arrived. Cameraman Ghosh then got busy with the lighting arrangements. More than an hour passed. One saw then the leading stars of the film alighting from their cars. These VIP’s were: Charlie and his, Alsatian, Aga, David, Kusum Deshpande and Sunalini Devi. These dignitaries were returning from a dinner party at the Taj Mahal Hotel. This was evident from the black dinner jackets of the men, an apparel which, I knew, was banned in England during the war. In honour of these guests, a table was hurriedly laid, and coffee and sandwiches ceremoniously served. Even at the BBC, I had not seen such pomp and splendour! I couldn’t help asking myself: ‘Is this the same country where only a year ago, lakhs of Indians had died in the ‘great’ Bengal famine and thousands of patriots of the ’42 move-ment are still languishing in prisons?’

But, of course, I should have known that India is a land of contrasts. Having only recently returned from abroad, I had not yet got used to the Indian conditions.

After having partaken of the repast, the stars went home, since they were not in a mood to work! Phani Da coolly postponed the shooting to the next

day! It was, after all, only the first day of the shoot-ing, and the lighting arrangements might have taken too long!

I was now left with Navin Yagnik, the hero of the film. Navin had just about 'reached the threshold of stardom then, though not quite crossed it. While we had been drinking coffee, he was having his face made up for the shot. He now came out and sat be-side me. He wore a blue *kurta* and blue pyjamas, which clashed with the red of his make-up. In the course of our conversation, Navin remarked, 'These clothes will look white on the screen. You can wear snow-white clothes in a coloured film, but not in a black and white one. A dazzling white colour dis-turbs the cameraman!'

I asked, 'But don't these kind of clothes and so much make-up kill an artiste's natural instinct?'

All that Navin said was, 'One gets used to it'. His brief answer left me wondering whether he had un-derstood the purpose of my question. All the same, I felt very uneasy. All the books on the art of histrionics I had read had emphasised the point that acting must always be natural.

Navin had a broad, flat face, which at first did not produce a very favourable impression on me. It gave me a sort of malicious pleasure to think that on the screen I would look more handsome than . . . , However, when he smiled, dimples appeared in his cheeks a *la* Clark Gable, which made his face very attrac-tive indeed. Moreover, I was deeply impressed by his serious demeanour.

Navin was not to enjoy a long life. Within a year of the completion of that film, he fell victim to a serious ailment. However, in the few years he was associated with films, he did a lot of good work. He organised the 'extras' and studio workers and found-ed their union. He was an indefatigable fighter, for their rights. One of his comrades, Krishna Kumar, was treacherously killed by *goondas*. I salute the memory of these two valiant and honest men ...

I left Navin and went into the make-up room. The make-up man's name was Swamy, who has been in this profession for the last twenty years. And there has not been the slightest improvement in his financial condition! His is a typical case, in that the same fate befalls 99 out of 100 men in the film industry, an industry which relishes human blood as a man-eater does!

My face was now made up. I studied it in the mirror, but what I saw did not raise my spirits. Was my face really so narrow and elongated? Or was it perhaps the wrong positioning of those lights over the mirror which was

making my face look so un-natural? Or could it be, that my health had indeed deteriorated so much?

Only recently, I had run into Bhavnani on Lamington Road. He had told me bluntly, 'Look, Mr Sahni, don't take it ill, but I think you no longer look as handsome as you used to do, when we met in Kashmir. You remind me now of Gary Cooper.'

Any artiste would have *felt* flattered to be compared with the great Gary Cooper. But Bhavnani obviously did not mean it as a compliment. The fact that it should have been Bhavnani, of all people, who tried to discourage me in this way made me very sad, since it was the same Bhavnani, whom I had invited to come and stay with me in my Srinagar house!

My experience with 'letters of recommendations' was not any better either. Both Rai Bahadur Duni Chand of Filmistan and Inder Raj Anand, the Publicity Officer of Bombay Talkies, whom I had approached with such letters, recommending me for a career in films, had given, me the cold shoulder. Those letters were written by my cousin, J. N. Sahni, former editor of The Hindustan Times' and "The National Call".

Even Shantaram, who had received me so warmly at our first meeting, made me feel unwelcome when I called on him at the instance of Sathe and Abbas, who were then writing the script for Dr. Koto's, and thus were in daily contact with Shantaram. I found him a changed man, both mentally and physically. He had put on a lot of weight and had now taken to wearing a suit,

I too had changed. Surely, the man who till only recently had been broadcasting British war propaganda could not expect to receive the same polite treatment from his countrymen which they had ungrudgingly given to the 'lecturer from Shantiniketan or the worker from Gandhiji's Sevagram Ashram!' This second meeting with Shantaram lasted only a few minutes and since then we have hardly said anything to each other except 'Hello'.

I wish I could get all those, aspirants to a film, career, who approach producers and directors with letters of recommendations, to see that they are not worth the paper they are written on! Such a letter might help you to get a job in any other walk of life but it cannot turn you into an artiste. No producer will willingly risk giving a role to a novice, just because he has been recommended by someone. The norms of the film industry are different from those applicable elsewhere. In films, it is more a man's luck and his capacity to work hard that make him an artiste. And more often than not, the

person to whom the note is addressed is not at all in a position to help the aspirant, a fact the writer of the note is totally unaware of!

I now realise that it was foolish of me to have got myself worked up over Bhavnani's failure to help me. Now that the films had become 'talkies', he was no longer the successful producer he was in the era of silent films. When I went to see him, he was in great difficulties. By asking me to take care of my health, he was in fact displaying the noble side of his character. Gary Cooped may be considered a handsome man in Hollywood, but here in India, an artiste has to have a rotund face to deserve that epithet!

But then a raw aspirant cannot be expected to know what really goes on in the film world. Once he has had a number of knocks, the poor fellow starts suspecting the motives of every man who has anything to do with films!

Jagdish Sethi, too, had once told me to be more careful of my health. He was then at the pinnacle of his career. I still remember, what that versatile cha-acter actor had then told me: 'A slim man looks all the more slimmer on the screen. You must put on weight.' That was sound advice but I took it amiss! There was no doubt that my health had deteriorated considerably. The humid air of Bombay was playing havoc with it! Once when travelling in a taxi, I asked Abbas, 'Yar, how long have you been living in this city?' I was (trenched in perspiration. 'Seven', he answered. 'My God!' I said. 'I can't bring myself to believe that any-one can manage to live in this wretched city for seven long years!' 'You will, when you yourself have been here for seven years!' he said without lifting his eyes from the newspaper he was reading. How very true his prophecy has turned out to be! It is now a little more than seven years that I have been living in this city; in fact, it is twenty three!

More than anything else, it was financial worries and keeping "of irregular hours that had ruined my health. I was really hard up in those days. Thanks to a college friend of mine, who was the manager of a local branch of a bank, I was allowed an overdraft to the tune of Rs. 2,000/- over my account. However, as luck would have it, he was subsequently transferred to some other branch and I was faced with the moral responsibility of repaying the loan, before he handed over charge to his successor.

I did all in my power to earn some money to repay that loan but there was precious little I was capable of doing, save giving radio programmes and translating books. I was desperate, since my honour was at stake. I therefore jumped at the chance when a friend told me that the Films Division paid one the princely sum of a hundred and fifty rupees for writing and reading the

script of their films. I lost no time in calling on the director, who sent for me the moment his secretary took my card to him. I was, however, completely bowled over when I entered his cabin, since I found myself standing before the very man I had interviewed two years ago in London!

After coming down from Oxford, he had applied for a job in the Hindustani 'Section of the BBC. In the absence of our director Zulfikar Ali Bukhari, who happened to be in India then, he had been sent to me. I had found his Urdu accent defective and hence he did not get the job. Now the roles reversed. Standing there before him as an applicant for a very ordinary job, I felt terribly humiliated. He turned out to be a gentleman, though, in that he promptly approved of my candidature, without saying a word that might have made me feel small. However, all I could earn from his assignment was about Rs.500 since the recordist did not quite like the way I spoke the lines. All the same, I was determined not to lose heart, although I used to be reminded of the dark period of my life whenever I looked at my made-up face in the mirror.

Came the day of the shooting. I was going to face the cameras for the first time in my life. I told my-self, 'Before the day is out, your fate as an actor will have been decided, one way or the other.' Needless to say, I was very keen on making a good impression on Phani Da but inevitably that made-up face of mine kept haunting me. Moreover, for the life of me, I could not understand how a man could ever act naturally when his face had layers of powder over it! Of course, I did not know then that an artiste had to take the help of all sorts of artificial props to be able to act naturally, and that this required' a deep study of the art of histrionics. I was then under the impression that all that was required of an actor was that he talked and acted as he always did in his daily life. In other words, he could dispense with the theory of acting! All newcomers to the acting profession labour under the same impression, which is, of course, a mistake, and they have to pay a heavy price for it.

Luckily when I stepped on to the set, I found the camera set for a long-shot. This meant, I could move about freely on the set. The scene was like this: The hero is seated at a desk, with a table-lamp on it. He is reading a book. I, a man about town and a friend of the hero, appear in the doorway, draw a chair and make myself comfortable. I light a cigarette and start criticising the old-fashioned ways of my friend. After I have said one sentence, the shot gets cut.

They say, a novice at gambling always draws the winning card at his first attempt. I acted so naturally in this first shot of my life that my feat was

applaud-ed by everyone on the set. They were all amazed at the nonchalant way I had blown smoke rings, which was apparently a wonderful achievement. Thereafter, for the next two shots the camera was brought a little closer. I continued to act in my, effortless way, as if to show them that for a man with a BBC background, acting was child's play! I returned home in high spi-rits in the small hours.

Three days later, I was again called—this time to par-ticipate in the day shooting. When I arrived at the studio, I found it in the midst of hectic activity. Make-up was being applied to several people in a large hall. Across the corridor, there was another large hall, where women artistes were being made up. Un-derstandably, the atmosphere in this other hall was reminiscent of a boisterous wedding party! I was admitted to the men's hall. The people there were all strangers to me. Even if someone had told me that they were 'extras' that would not have made any difference to me, since I had no idea what the word meant. As I stood there watching them being 'made up', I thought they were artistes like me and Navin. I assumed that, as in the world of theatre, in films, too, all artistes were being treated on an equal foot-ing; no one was small or big. It was a 'tea party', that was going to be 'shot', hence like me all the peo-ple there were in their best suits or *sherwanis*. To look at them was to know that they were all nice peo-ple. I fell to talking to them. Before long, I got to know them arid we all became friends. The fact that I had returned from England made me rise in their esteem. Even in the People's Theatre, I had not experienced the sort of camaraderie which prevailed on this set. One of the men there was a prosperous businessman. He owned a number of furniture shops in the town. It was only to satisfy some compelling urge that he was appearing before the cameras as one of the guests in that 'tea party'. He told me that he himself was thinking of making a film and very gene-rously offered me the villain's role, since, in his opi-nion, I looked like an 'English villain'. Everyone in that crowd fancied himself to be either a film producer or a story writer. Amongst them was a Pathan, a tall, strapping fellow by the name of Aslam. He appeared to be a polite and courteous person. Nevertheless, he could not help criticising Phani Da. He told us that the latter had offered him a small role in one of his films to start with. In his next film, Phani Da had promised to give him a major role and thereafter he was to be made nothing less than a hero. By that token, he should have been playing the hero in the film that was now on the sets; instead he had been told to join the crowd of *bhai log* and await instruc-tions . The words *bhai log* sounded funny and it made me laugh but I checked myself when I saw tears in Aslam's eyes. To see Aslam so woe-

begone gave me a jolt. I suddenly remembered that the promise Phani Da had given me was exactly like the one given to Aslam.

I could not bring myself to believe that Phani Da should be capable of doing such an injustice to anyone, since I had always had great regard for the man. Interestingly, he went on to give me exactly the same treatment, which Aslam had received at his hands. That had hurt me too and thereafter I had lost no opportunity to disparage Phani Da. Today, however, I wouldn't blame him. After having spent twenty years in this world of make-believe, I have come to the conclusion that it has its own values and norms (with which the readers will get familiar as they read these memoirs of mine). I was not one of the 'guests' invited to the 'tea party', which was being shot on that day. Having, therefore, nothing to do, I got bored. The next day, however, Phani Da's cameraman Ghosh and a few other members of the unit came to the desk where I was whiling away time. They perched the camera on the desk and got busy with the lighting arrangements. While I sat there 'basking' in the full glare of the arc lights, no one paid any attention to me, nor cared to explain to me what the shot was about.

I felt terribly self-conscious when everybody started staring at me. They seemed to have guessed that I had got frightened of the camera.

When the lighting arrangements were over, a dressed fowl was placed before me on the desk. Phani Da now explained to me the shot. As soon as the clap was sounded, the assistant standing next to the camera, would shout 'Lenin!' whereupon I was to smile at him, lift the fowl by its legs and say 'Beast!'

I found the thought horrible that the great Lenin's name should be thus bracketed with the word 'Beast'. But how could I, at that late stage, object to such a juxtaposition of these two words when the scene was about to be shot? Perhaps the man, who was to utter the word 'Lenin', was the hero of the film and there-by the director wanted to indicate that he was a communist! World War II was on, and in those days the communists used to call it a 'People's War'. They were on the side of the Allies—England, America and Russia. Subhash Chandra Bose's followers, on the other hand, were in the camp of the Axis powers. According to them, the communists were 'traitors'. And as for the Congress, it had a finger in both the pies, since, while they were hailing the war as the 'people's war', they were also branding the communists as traitors! 'Maybe', I told myself, 'Phani Da is an admirer of Subhash and wants to slight one of the members of the IPTA - who are generally thought to be communists - by showing disrespect to Lenin. But then I also thought it possible that the director had purposely

made the hero ridicule communism in the opening scenes, so that later when he (the hero) saw 'reason', his 'conversion' should appear all the more convincing!

There was, however, hardly any time to weigh the pros and cons. There were two courses open to me. I could either have refused to play in that scene or ignored the disrespect to Lenin. I chose the latter course, since it was the easier of the two. But to this day, I have regretted my action. Under no circumstances should I have consented to utter that word, which clearly showed the great man in a disparaging light - It was nothing short of moral cowardice on my part to have acquiesced in such a deed.

In a way, this incident also highlights the difference between the milieu of the films of yesteryear and that of today's films. The former did take note of the social and political trends of the times, which cannot be even remotely said of today's grotesque pot-boilers.

Anyway, I somehow went through the first rehearsal, with Phani Da looking at me with those kindly eyes of his! But try as I might, I could not bring myself to utter the word! 'Beast' loud enough nor manage to make my smile broad enough. So a second rehearsal was taken. Phani Da was still not quite satisfied with my performance. As he asked the recordist to make arrangements for a third rehearsal, I implored him to drop it and do the final 'take' straight-away. I assured him that it would come perfect, Phani Da accepted my suggestion and asked Swami, the make-up man, to freshen up my make-up. He put a fresh layer of powder on my face. I felt, I was a marionette—a thought which robbed my acting of all spontaneity. I went through the 'take' mechanically. When it was over, I expected Phani Da to admonish me. Surprisingly, he did not find anything wrong with my acting, and okayed the 'take'. As soon as the people on the set heard him say 'O.K.', they rushed to me to congratulate me, since it was the first close-up of my life! Phani Da got one of his assistants to buy *rasgullahs* on my account and distributed them amongst the members of the unit. Everyone had a word of praise for me, which was, of course, not sincerely meant. For the life of me, I could not see that I had done something so wonderful that everyone should want to congratulate me!

This business of congratulating people is also very much a part of life in the show business. (With this practice too the readers will get familiar as they read on.)

I had no doubt that it was only for form's sake that they were congratulating me, since I knew for certain that each one of them could not

care less whether I failed or succeeded as an actor. Moreover, in the world of films, people always praise you to your face, but the moment your back is turned, they will start running you down. The ‘outsiders’ think, this is only hypocrisy, but we ‘insiders’ find this hypocrisy rather a help in our careers. Since, no one in this profession enjoys what may be called ‘psychological security’, a word of praise, although not sincerely meant, goes a long way in boosting the confidence of a newcomer. If, for example, at the end of that first close-up of mine, someone on the set had told me the plain truth, I was bound to get disheartened and then perhaps I would have been in no position to act the next day. I remember, at the end of that first close-up, I had returned home dead-tired, with a splitting headache. It was then that I realised what a powerful influence a camera is capable of wielding on an actor. The experience taught me that the actor can never ignore the camera! The fact, that a close-up had been taken of me and, moreover, *rusgullahs* had been distributed to mark the event, told the *bhai log* (extras) that I was not one of them. The moment they realised that it was not a ‘bit’ role, but a fairly long one that I had been assigned, they stopped talking to me as if I had become suddenly a stranger to them! They simply threw me out of their brotherhood.

What a mistake it was on my part to labour under the delusion that in the world of films, there were no partitions or walls separating one set of artistes from another! If anything, here this division is much more rigid than the one in the other walks of life.

In my next scene, I had to play opposite Swarnalata, the heroine. The great lady was not even willing to do a rehearsal with me. The way she treated me, I might have been some kind of a diseased worm, whom you kept at arm’s length! In the ‘take’, she would not even look at me, although the scene required her to talk to me. She kept on looking straight into the camera, while she recited her lines!

It was then that I missed the friendly and informal atmosphere of the extras’ brotherhood. It was a world peopled by dreamers who looked forward to becoming some day stars or producers. I shall always cherish the memory of the days spent in the company of these friendly folks!

Nine

Deodhar Hall, where we used to do the rehearsals of the IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association) plays, was also the headquarters of the Progressive Writers’ Assoc. Honestly, till today, I have not been able to

determine how much the views of these writers have been beneficial - if at all - to the community at large. Nevertheless, thanks to my membership of the IPTA, I made friends with a few kind-hearted and noble souls, one of whom was the late Ayub Khan, brother of actor Dilip Kumar. Ayub preferred wearing white *salwar-kamiz* to suits. He was frail and not very robust to look at. When he peered at you through his thick-lensed glasses, you had an uneasy feeling since his look seemed to say, 'I have not many days left in this world' and when he laughed, you felt he was laughing at the folly of the whole world! He had a thick mop of jet-black hair, which he used to tend with great care. His punctuality and clean habits marked him out in that group of writers and artistes and it is perhaps because of these traits of his that we became great friends.

Ayub lived almost next door to Chetan on Pali Hill. His father, a fruit merchant, had a shop in the Crawford Market. The family hailed from Peshawar from where it had migrated to Bombay a decade ago. It was a noble family, which still retained its old-world charm and courtesies.

Ayub, though the second son of his father, was however his confidant. Bombay was 'foreign territory' to me and since theirs was a Punjabi way of life, the Khan household was a veritable haven for me. Yusuf (Dilip Kumar) had not yet made his mark in films. His first film, Bombay Talkies' *Jwar Bhata* had just gone on the sets. Nasir Khan, Dilip's younger brother, was a good friend of Dev Anand's. One day - it was probably at Abbas's instance — members of the *Zubeida* unit were invited to a lunch at the Filmistan Studios, Nitin Bose was then about to launch his film *Mazdoor* at that studio.. Those who have seen this film will agree with me, when I say that of all the films that have so far been produced in Hindustan, *Mazdoor* takes the pride of place, as a realistic film. I have not yet come across any other film which has dealt with the class struggle with such realism, sharpness, and precision. Indeed, all the aspects of the class struggle—be it the capitalists' constant efforts to divide the ranks of the workers, or the tricks they employ to help the bourgeoisie—realise their aspirations, so that the members of this class may sell their souls and help their capitalist benefactors to bleed the workers to death; or again, their raising the bogey of religion or even their attempts to murder the labour leaders had been so boldly depicted in this film that the producers themselves got panicky when it was released. In several cities, the film was withdrawn although it was drawing record crowds. A friend told me that the English Deputy Commissioner of Police at Kanpur had, at the behest of his Indian courtiers, all millionaires, ordered the film to be withdrawn from a local cinema on the

fourth day of its run, because of which the owner had to incur considerable loss.

In Bengal, Bimal Roy was making his *Hamrahi*, a film which went on to ridicule devastatingly the capitalist system. Nevertheless, he too had not been able to make the film- realistic enough. The last 'fade-out' showed the hero and heroine walk hand in-hand towards the horizon - a very typical end to a New Theatres' film-which seemed to indicate that they had left all their problems to 'kismet'! Mazdoor, however, had refused to end on such an escapist note.

Moreover, its hero did not marry the millionaire's daughter. Far from making out that the workers themselves were to be blamed for their plight, the film had the courage to say in unequivocal terms that it was through unity and solidarity alone that the workers could break the capitalist system and lead our people on to the path of socialism.

Nitin Bose seemed to believe that the artistes working in films that propagated progressive views should themselves hold such views. Perhaps it was out of this conviction that he had invited the *Zubeida* unit to lunch!

On the day of the lunch our unit was waiting at the Bandra Station for the train to arrive, which would take us to Goregaon, where the studio was.' Out of the blue emerged Nasir Khan, whom his friend, the shy and retiring Dev Anand, pressed to join our group.

As things turned out, the meal brought luck to Nasir Khan, who technically was an uninvited guest. It was he alone whom Nitin Bose asked to call at the studio the next day. When he went to see Bose, the latter offered him the lead-role in *Mazdoor*. As everyone knows, Nasir played the mill manager's role with a rare brilliance, despite his total ignorance of the art of histrionics. This testifies to Bose's talent as a director. What is more, it proves that the choice of the right type of artiste is a prerequisite for the success of a film or a play.

We were -all obsessed with the idea of taking up a film career in those days and as for Dev Anand, he had no other interest left in life. He was determined to follow in his friend's footsteps!

Nasir's becoming a star in so unexpected a fashion can only be attributed to 'kismet' alone, since our people have an unshakable faith in that commodity. I must refer, here to the state of affairs in the film industry which I have been observing for the past two decades that I have spent there. It is only a member of the bourgeoisie who can hope to make good, in this

profession. The lot of the proletariat, on the other hand, has always been one of sweat and toil!

Eventually, fortune smiled on us, when Prithviraj Kapoor founded his Prithvi Theatres. He offered roles both to Uzra Mumtaz and Damayanti. Damayanti was now earning Rs. 500/- a month, which in those days was quite a tidy sum. The first thing we did was to hire a small bungalow in the Theosophical Colony at Juhu, although its rent was a little higher than what we could afford.

There is a world of difference between the Juhu of those days and what it is today. It had not yet acquired the prosperous look which it wears today! Save a few houses of the rich, the place was full of thatched cottages, which were known as 'shacks'. There was no BEST service, Instead you travelled in privately owned decrepit buses, which often got bogged down in the dirt track in the monsoon.

The rehearsals of the IPTA plays were proceeding apace at the Deodhar Hall. They would last till almost nine in the evening, leaving us just enough time to run either to the Charni Road or the Grant Road Station to catch the nine o'clock local to Santa Cruz. If it was late by so much as a minute, we would find ourselves stranded at Santa Cruz Station, since the last bus for Juhu would leave at ten and the bus-driver used to take a malicious pleasure in seeing us miss it, which would happen about twice a week. We would then trudge along the two-mile distance from the Santa Cruz Station to Juhu. We used to be hungry and to lessen the pangs of hunger a little, we would buy peanuts and munch them on the way!

Many of our friends, including Chetan and Uma, thought it was madness on our part to live so far away from the city. True, one spent a lot of time travelling to and fro but then you lived right on the seashore and this was surely an adequate compensation for the time spent in buses and trains. Right from the day we moved into our bungalow, we became enamoured of the sea and the atmosphere surrounding it. Indeed, ours was a case of love at first sight. Before long, we realised that we couldn't now live anywhere else but amid those palm groves of Juhu. Early morning, our two children would run to the beach with their little toy buckets to recover their 'tax' from the fishermen. They coaxed the crabs out of their holes and lifted them by their prongs. Shabnam used to eat even live fish. As for me and my wife, living right on the seashore was an experience of a life-time. The human soul always craves for the Infinite and looking at the waves and the vast expanse of the sea, one becomes conscious of it.

Gandhiji too had retired to a cottage near the beach after his release from prison. Every morn-ing and evening we would see him being carried to the beach on a chair. The chair was then placed in shallow water near the shore and he would dip his bare ankles in it and sit there for a long time, deeply engrossed in thought. We used often to see Pyarelal, Dr. Sushila Nayar and Mira Ben strolling on the beach. We would then remember our days at the Sevagram Ashram. I felt I must call on Bapu once again to pay my respects but I could not summon the courage to do so. Instead, I wrote him a letter, requesting him to grant me the privilege of an interview. I had, of course, no hope of ever getting a reply. Eventually, one day we ran into Mira Ben who appeared to recognise us as 'that couple who was at the Ashram. Although, to start with, she talked to us nicely, she suddenly became very formal and cold, which rather put us off. I did not then have the courage to ask her what had become of my letter to Gandhiji.

Our going away to London had perhaps something - to do with this cold reception. Gandhiji, of course, could forgive us for leaving the Ashram to go to London and join the B.B.C. Indeed, we had sought his permission to do so, which he had given, albeit a little reluctantly. But the other inmates of the Ashram could not be expected to show such magnanimity. In fact, they had had to put up with a lot of Inconvenience, as a result *of* our leaving the Ashram.

Nevertheless, we did not think that we need have a guilty conscience on that score. The fact was, no words could have adequately described the veneration we felt for Gandhiji. Dammo; especially, had received infinite love and 'kindness from Bapu, Kasturba, Asha Di and Aryam Da. All the same, we had almost ceased to have any faith in Gandhism. True, we had not fought for the freedom of our motherland nor gone to jail like others. But .then we had spent countless sleepless nights in London, while outside the bombs were exploding almost every few minutes. We had known the horror of living under the shadow of death. We had spent four long years in Europe, during which several lakhs of its inhabitants had fallen victim to the war. We had witnessed how the Nazis had achieved the ultimate in beastliness by making lampshades out of the skins of innocent Jews. Consequently, we had become convinced that it was Marxism alone, and not Gandhism, which matched the spirit of the modern age, and with the passage of time, this conviction of ours has become all the more firm.

At the varsity, I had studied the history of English literature through which I had imbibed the doctrine of realism as applied to art and literature. I realised that in days when realism was unknown to European literature, it

had merely length and breadth without any depth, which it acquired only during the 'Renaissance'. This depth is really the third dimension of art. The uniqueness of realism lies in its ability to lend to a work of art this third dimension, which is what I have always striven to bring into my acting—both on the stage and the screen. It is perhaps the most difficult task that any artiste can attempt. Nevertheless, it alone gives him genuine pleasure and satisfaction which is his reward as a creative artiste. Indeed, an artiste, be he an actor or a painter, is always anxious to infuse life into his creation, when presenting it to his audience. But to create a realistic role, an actor need not have necessarily studied and understood the stages by which the technique of acting developed in Europe since the fifteenth century, though, of course, this may help to some extent. What he must know, however, are the forces which have contributed to the evolution of human society". He must try to seek answers to the questions: What is the most important problem confronting human society and how can it solve it? Which are the trends that have lost their appeal to it and which are the new ones that are gaining ground? It is only when one has understood the psychology of a group that one can 'read' the individuals comprising it. As I delved deeper and deeper into Marxism, I acquired a clearer intellectual vision.

Marx's *Das Kapital* had a profound effect on me. It was as if I had found a solution to a major problem. I realise that acting is just one of the several vocations that men follow. Just as a carpenter or an engineer meets a specific physical requirement of his fellow-citizens by supplying them with a table or a machine, & playwright or an actor satisfies their psychological urge through his play or his *role*. Both types of work are equally useful to society; there cannot be any 'gradation' between them.

Our people generally believe that an artiste is "born" and that his art is a God-given gift. It is this belief of theirs that makes them regard an actor as someone unique. I, on my part, however, had become convinced that such a belief is absolutely unfounded. This conviction of mine was all to the good, since it is wrong to bring any kind of spirituality into the realm of art. That would only harm art.

Take the case of American films. In them you find each role, whether big or small, enacted with consummate ease and skill. This is in sharp contrast to our Hindi films, which consider only the major roles of any significance. Consequently, no great acting talent is evident in the smaller roles. Moreover, you find well-known actors accepting roles simultaneously in as many as twenty films at a time! This craze for making quick money inevitably results in the lowering of artistic standards.

If acting talent is indeed a God-given gift, then how does one explain the fact that in the West, where people are not very religious, you find every actor, no matter how insignificant, playing his role effortlessly, while *in* our country which makes such a fetish of religion, there are only a handful of people who are endowed with this talent? The fact is, acting is not only an art, it is a science also. Indeed, anyone can become a good actor by making a scientific study of histrionics.

All the same, it is also wrong to assume that a man's social milieu has nothing to do with the development of his personality. Some people do come into the world blessed with a talent. It is this inborn talent that makes a man a brilliant scientist, or a painter, or a musician, or an actor or a sportsman. But a man can blossom into such an artiste only if, in his childhood his innate talent had been carefully nurtured. In our country, however, more often than not, young talent is nipped in the bud on account of poverty and Ignorance.

A man has to be endowed with a keen intellect and acute sense of imagination if he is to become an actor. In some children this faculty for imagination is developed to a very fine degree, a fact which an observant parent or a teacher does not fail to notice. Such children are capable of reaching the pinnacle in the world of arts.

Anyone can become a good actor, but only a few become great artistes. Who can, however, say with any certainty that X will go on to become a great artiste, while Y will remain just an ordinary actor? The wise course for any man would, therefore, be to consider himself an average instead of an extraordinary person and to work hard for whatever goal he wants to attain in life.

When I look back on my childhood days, one thing stands out in my memory and that is that as a child I had a very sharp sense of imagination. True, every child has a tendency to mimic an adult. My 'act', however, used to be so lively that even adults would gladly participate in it!

In the school I "showed a pronounced inclination towards languages. I used to like even Sanskrit. Indeed, as early as my tenth year, I had read the *Valmiki Ramayan*. I had even written a few *shlokas* in the epic's genre, which I had recited at an annual function of the Arya Samaj. I would be at my happiest, whenever the teacher wrote a 'key sentence' on the blackboard and asked us children to write a story based on it and I had no difficulty in memorising the literary texts.

Both my parents and teachers had always encouraged me in my study of literature. I had read English literature as my principal subject for the M.A. and I had begun writing short stories and poems soon after leaving the university. In fact, I had always wanted to become a man of letters. As I said earlier, it was only through an accident that I became a film actor. Today, if anyone were to see any of my earlier films, he would find my acting so pedestrian that he would scarcely believe that I could ever act even reasonably well. A number of my friends, who started their film careers with me, used to act very well even as novices.” Everyone had predicted that they would soon rise to great heights in the acting profession. However, these expectations were eventually belied because unfortunately my actor-friends succumbed to the temptation of looking upon themselves as some kind of unique personalities.

Instead of devoting themselves to a scientific study of histrionics, they would sit back and wait for ‘divine inspiration’ to come to them. These actors were under the impression that the characters they had to play would of their own free will enter into their ‘geist’. Consequently, you either found them in some kind of a trance; awaiting this ‘inspiration’, while the shot was being readied, or they would get themselves drunk! Inevitably, therefore, they could not make much headway; while I went on to achieve comparatively more success in spite of my meagre acting talents!

Those who have no idea of what Marxism is about think that it is a mere political theory. This is, of course, an erroneous idea. In effect, Marxism is a philosophy which can analyse every aspect of worldly life from the scientific point of view. An artiste is ever curious to know how much significance society attaches to his art, and he cannot help asking himself, ‘Do I occupy a place in society in keeping with this significance? In this respect, it is Marxism which shows one the right way. I believe that in this modern age, the study of Marxism is as important to an artiste as it is to a sociologist. Marxism taught me how the problem of languages could be studied from a scientific point of view. Through imbibing the thoughts of Tagore and Gandhi, I had already veered round to the view that the mother tongue is the best vehicle of self-expression for a writer. The study of Marxism substantiated this conviction all the more.

Following the success of *Zubeida*, my colleague in the IPTA came to agree with everything that I proposed to do. I insisted that different groups for different languages” be founded something which IPTA had already accepted in principle. It now set about giving the proposal a practical shape. Before long, we had dramatic groups performing in Marathi, Gujarati,

English and even in Telugu. Besides these various groups, IPTA also had an All India Dance Troupe. After the break-up of Uday Shankar's troupe, almost all its leading artistes had joined us. They were such renowned artistes as Ravi Shankar, Sachin Shankar, Shanti Bardhan, Abani Das Gupta, Prem Dhavan, Ditia Gandhi, Gul Bardhan, Bina Rai, and Ali Akbar Khan!

Our dramatic troupes too enjoyed the patronage of such eminent litterateurs and artistes as Mama Wamerkar, Chandravadan Mehta, Gunwautrai Acharya, Prithviraj Kapoor and Durga Khote. These people were no mere advisers, but wrote plays for us or acted in them. Durga Khote herself had made her stage debut in an IPTA play.

The IPTA movement was not confined to Bombay alone. It had spread all over India and leading writers and artistes from different states were now coming under its fold. A unique bond of friendship and love was being forged between artistes from different parts of India. The artistes of today's generation would, I think, scarcely believe that such a thing was at all possible!

What was it that gave the IPTA movement such phenomenal popularity in so short a time? Surely, no movement of such a magnitude can strike root, all by itself.

The answer to the above question, according to my lights, is that the IPTA flourished because in those days, the Communist Party was following the right policy, a policy that evoked an immediate response from the people. I remember how people in the auditorium would stand up spontaneously as soon as someone had started singing a Prem Dhavan song. They would listen to it with rapt attention and a solemn expression on their faces. The party's policy was genuinely nationalistic in its outlook, while at the same time being in tune with true internationalism. Every problem of the day was placed before the people in clear-cut terms by the party, and the people were exhorted to unite and fight the British. In spite of its alignment with the Freedom Movement, the party was also the latter's critic. The devotion with which the party workers used to work for the IPTA had won them everyone's respect. Moreover, it was truly selfless work since none of them ever claimed any credit for it. Even their enemies could not help admiring the disciplined way these communist workers organised everything.

Marxist thought was very much in vogue in those days. Even in capitalist circles, it was considered to be fashionable to 'drop' Marxism. This fashion can perhaps be explained by the communists' calling World War II a

‘people’s war’, their antagonism to the British Raj notwithstanding! And at that time, this slogan was all to the advantage of the capitalists .

Jaswant Thakkar was already a dear friend of mine. Gradually I got to know the other workers of the party also. The party’s central office was in Raj Bhavan, a building on the Sandhurst Road. The warmth and the friendliness of the place touched one’s heart. The pleasure one derived from eating in the party’s lunch-room was like the one the Sikhs get from eating in their ‘Guru ka Langar’. It was in Raj Bhavan that I first met P. C. Joshi and before long our acquaintance blossomed into a beautiful friendship which has lasted to this day. An ardent revolutionary that he was, P. C. loved every facet of life intensely. He would devote every moment of his life to widening the boundaries of his knowledge. He did not believe that art should merely be a hand-made to political leaders. He himself took an intelligent interest in art. Time and again, his advice and guidance proved of great help to us in the IPTA. He was accessible to all and even to a lowly clerk he was a kind friend, guide and philosopher. He exuded a strange kind of magnetism and none who had met him once could ever forget him. No wonder then P.C.’s friends were scattered all over the country. Tamilians and Malabaris used to consider him as much their own comrade as people from his native UP, while still in her teens, P.C.’s wife Kalpana had attempted to shoot the Governor of Bengal, and had been sentenced to life imprisonment for the outrage. It is ages now since our two families have been on the friendliest of terms. In fact, it was P.C.’s dynamic personality that had made both me and Damtno become members of the Communist Party.

Nevertheless, it would be also wrong to assume that it is only by acquiring a Marxist orientation and a realistic viewpoint that an artiste can reach his *manzil*. Above all, an artiste must first learn to act according to the dictates of his conscience, even if this involved a mental struggle. In effect this means, he must be prepared to give up the established theories and accept a new creed, a course of action which by no means is easy to adopt. The citizens of the industrialised nations - even if they are capitalist countries — find it comparatively easy to adopt a realistic philosophy of life, since they have long been exposed to science and technology, which have affected every facet of their lives. The norms and standards of the Indian artistes of my generation are, however, those of a feudal age. Consequently, when they start flaunting their Marxist labels, they look grotesque — almost as grotesque as an ugly woman trying to look pretty by smearing her face profusely with talcum powder and rouge!

What strikes me most about people from industrial-ly advanced countries — both the socialist and the capitalist ones — is that they work as a disciplined team. Moreover, these people do not hold extremist views. They are capable of listening to you atten-tively and then assessing the worth of your opinions in the context of their own experience. They do not mix personalities with ‘isms’. In other words, they are concerned more with what you might happen to be telling them than with your personal life.

We Indians, on the other hand, are a different kind of people and that includes Marxists too! Once any section of our people has accepted Marxism as a philosophy of life, they will inevitably become as fanatic as they used to be as believers in a particular religion. Even as Marxists, we continue to be intole-rant of other political systems. The slightest differ-ence of opinion with others is a good enough reason for us to brand them as ‘chicken-hearted’, ‘bourgeois’, ‘reactionaries’ and what have you! And, moreover, we now start worshipping our leaders, as we used to do our prophets or *avatars*! We have even no qualms about sacrificing truth in the interest of our party! A party colleague becomes our friend and of course the man in the opposite camp automatically becomes our enemy — simple logic Indeed! Marxism, in fact, expects one to shed one’s ego but we Indians end up by becoming all the more egotistic.

I too was no exception. The moment I became a card-holding member of the party, I began undergoing a mental transformation. I took to evaluating art wholly in terms of political expediency. I now looked upon IPTA as a mere tool by which to further the interests of the party. In fact, I was getting to be a petty dictator. With the help of the party colleagues, I could now get everything done, the way I wanted it. The non-party members did advise me sometimes, but it was up to me to accept or reject their advice. Though every one of its members had accepted socialistic goals the IPTA had set itself and its national spirit they certainly did not believe that the Theatre should remain a mere platform to propa-gate a particular political creed. They were also keen on staging plays which were both artistic and entertaining, I, on the other hand, was totally blind to the opinion of my colleagues. The moment any one of them raised the question of technique, I would go at him hammer and tongs!

Nevertheless, those IPTA days bring back to me pleasant memories. We were for ever staging our plays in working class districts, or dingy little by-lanes. We could thus observe at close quarters the life of the common man in Bombay — an experience which later stood me in good stead when I started acting in films.

Justice was now ready and prior to its release, Phani Da arranged a private show of the film. When I saw my close-up in the scene where I had to bran-dish that fowl, it was as if the roof had caved in and a big stone had landed squarely on my skull! I felt I was staring at a dead face! And the make-up had made it all the more horrible to look at! I was crest-fallen!

I did not let that bother me too much, though. True to his word, Phani Da had signed me for an important role in his next film *Door Chalo*. Moreover, Dammo was to play my wife in that film. Kamal Kapoor and Naseem . (Jr.) were the hero and the heroine and the cast included Aga, Kishore Sahu's younger brother, Ghosh (a peculiar young man who died too in a peculiar manner) and K. C. Dey. I was very happy indeed that I could meet K. C. Dey and be near him to watch him act. Dammo was like a loving daughter to him.

Most of the scenes of this film had to be shot out-doors in the vicinity of Ghodbunder Road. I was struck by the way Aga used to tackle his role. One moment he used to be talking to us in the normal way, without putting on any 'act', and the next, when the camera was switched on and the shooting got underway, he would cease to be Aga. 'Acquiring' the mannerisms of the role he was playing, he would instantly become one with it. If I happened to be acting with him, he would cast some sort of a spell over me. I would tell myself that he was indulging in overacting, which is indeed a major failing of the Hindustani actors. But the other members of the unit used to laugh uproariously over his pranks and praise him lavishly for his acting! Try as I might, I could not understand why they should praise him so much, who was after all making such a 'fool' of himself! I was sure, if anyone deserved praise, it was I, since I was acting, so naturally and with such admirable restraint! This line of thinking was, of course, typical of an ignoramus. Oblivious of the fact that he is 'hamming', the inexperienced actor will persist in believing that he is playing his role in the only way it should be played! As for my 'acting', the less said the better. Indeed, it was anything but acting!

It has been my experience that the flair for acting is more pronounced in a woman than in a man. Being of the weaker sex, a woman is obliged to fall back on instinct, when applying her mind to any job. Consequently, in her childhood itself, she displays a tendency towards both agility of mind and lightness of heart. A man in comparison is more reserved in his behaviour. I used to feel terribly embarrassed at the gay abandon with which Dammo always laughed, sang or danced in front of the cameras! Indeed, acting was in her very blood! And then came the day when the curtain rose on the

Prithvi Theatres' play *Deewar*. In the premiere show, Dammo appeared to be a little overawed in the presence of Prithviraj Kapoor, She was also badly made up. After the show I went to the green room and bucked her up, as a result of which she became an altogether different person in the second performance, which followed after a break of half an hour. I can say without the slightest exaggeration that *Deewar* made Dammo a darling of Bombay theatregoers. No play has hitherto won such acclaim as *Deewar* did. Indeed the unending queues one witnessed at the booking office of the theatre were longer-than those at any cinema house in Bombay!

Dammo had now become a star! From the day following the premiere of *Deewar*, film producers began trekking to our house — something which was a novelty for us!

Ten

In the days of World War II, the British Government would also sometimes grant well known artistes and companies licences to make films. As for those producers who made propaganda films with a view to boosting the war effort, the Government even helped them financially. The number of such producers was, however, very small, since the Indian public was averse to patronising propaganda films. New Theatres' *My Sister* was perhaps the lone film of this genre, which had any success at the box office; but that was largely due to K. L. Saigal's acting.

Thanks to the licences granted to them, Uday Shankar and Sadhana Bose too could produce films. My colleague on the B. B. C., Rafiq Anwar, who had put on the London stage a run-of-the-mill opera on the life of Buddha, had also been granted a licence to produce a film. Rafiq offered to pass it on to Chetan provided the latter made him the hero of his film *Neecha Nagar*. Chetan, therefore, was compelled to drop me in favour of Rafiq. Since my wife Pammo was not willing to act in that film without me, Chetan had to look for another heroine. Eventually in Lahore he found one, Kamini Kaushal. Although she was making her debut, her acting in that film was so natural that, she became the talk of the town even before the film was released. Krishan Chander too had produced a film, based on his play *Sarai Ke Bahar*. A financier who was an admirer of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya had placed his entire wealth at the disposal of that celebrated poet, so that he could make *Azadi*, an idealistic film.

I have cited these instances to prove that there was no dearth of finance if our intellectuals were inclined to produce films with a certain social content.

I have always felt that If only they had the ability to produce such films, the Hindi films of today would be on an altogether different level! But this was not to be! They neither tried to acquaint themselves with the special requirements of the film medium nor in any way kept their private lives within reasonable limits. Consequently, each film that they produced belied the people's expectations and they became thoroughly disillusioned with the intellectuals. As if this was not enough, thanks to their wrong notions about life, these learned people stood as much discredited in the eyes of the public as the very film magnates whom they often lampooned in their stories! I get incensed at these intellectuals (many of whom are my friends) when they start blaming both the public and the producers for showing a preference for escapist films. After all, I have seen the best of opportunities go a-begging!

Thanks to the enterprising spirit of Abbas and Sathe, IPTA too got a licence as a result of which we could produce *Dharti ke Lal*. It was the first major experience for me in my film career. The entire film was planned by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, all by himself. He was both its writer and its director. He was assisted by three men who hailed from three different parts of India—Shombhu Mitra from Bengal, Vasant Gupte from Maharashtra and I from Bombay. The film was based on three books which in those days had been acclaimed as classics. All three had the Bengal famine as their central theme. They were, the two plays by Bijan Bhattacharya *Zabanbandi*, and *Navannu* and Krishan Chander's lyrical novel *Annadat*.

However, Abbas's first draft of the scenario came as a bitter disappointment to many of the IPTA members, especially to me and Shombhu Mitra. Though I am a great admirer of Abbas's plays, I am also an equally frank critic of his films. Abbas, I find, is obsessed with a particularly useless and pedantic jargon through which he seeks to project his films, *a la* Shantaram. For example, instead of building each sequence of his film in a natural and plausible manner, Abbas only ends up in making it all too artificial, thanks to his penchant for theatrical dialogue and symbolic images. True, the message he wants to convey is full of progressive ideas; all the same, his method of presentation makes his films boring. The viewer does not find them engrossing enough to make him forget himself. Watching his films, he has rather the feeling that Abbas is taking him by the scruff of his neck and shouting at him; 'Look, better be entertained, or else . . . !' To some extent, every Hindi film producer is a prey to this philosophy. He is like that naive mother, who knows only one way of pacifying her crying baby, and that is to give it a toy to play with! Our producers have not yet learnt the art of holding the attention of their audience solely by the strength of the stories

of their films. To do that, they have to go and stuff their films with spicytitbits! The Hollywood film men, on the other hand, can make a brazen falsehood pass off as truth! As for their Indian counterparts, they will make even truth look like a falsehood! Our men are not satisfied until they have paraded their knowledge of the film technique to their heart's content!

This screen play of Abbas was a hotchpotch of various ingredients taken from Pearl Buck's *Good Earth*, Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and God knows what else! This was as if he had no faith in the writings of Bijan Bhattacharya or Krishan Chander!

Shombhu Mitra and I were better acquainted with the technique of Realism and we had only contempt for those who took only to the well-trodden path. But we too had overlooked one important fact and that is: The Bengal Famine was by no means an entertaining event! The masses, however, expect a film to be entertaining above everything else. While Abbas was hesitating to take to the path of realism, we were all for it! But we were young then and inexperienced too! Though we were all educated men, this lack of experience had made us all rather selfish. Instead of trying to win over others to our point of view, we would stubbornly stick to our opinions and that only made our discussions acrimonious!

It was Abbas's firm conviction that he understood the intricacies of the film art better than any of us. We, on the other hand, were proud to be the people's artistes and revolutionaries. Moreover, we were not prepared to acquiesce in any injustice being done to the principles we believed in. We were backed by the Communist Party and without its help; the film had little chance of being launched. No wonder, then, that we took every opportunity to snipe at Abbas.

It was IPTA that had planned the film *Dharti ke Lal* and inevitably the Bengali group became the most powerful group in IPTA. Who indeed could be better acquainted than they with the hardships the famine-stricken, people of Bengal had to endure? Our difficulty, however, was that none of them could speak Hindi with even reasonable fluency; consequently, they could not convey to their colleagues what they wanted to say. The discussions and the rehearsals' preceding the actual shooting often dragged on endlessly, so that the cameraman and his assistants had no alternative but to cool their heels while they lasted. Abbas would sometimes walk out of the studio in a huff and we would run after him to bring him back! Or it was the other way round. Naturally all these moods and tantrums of ours raised the cost of the shooting. I, of course, had no knowledge then of this aspect of film-making nor did I care for it, since I was only an assistant director! If our

film did not flounder, it was solely because both the IPTA and the Communist Party saw to it that no member of the unit transgressed the limits of propriety. I am still an uncompromising critic of Abbas's films and yet I cannot help admiring him for his extreme patience and devotion with which he nurtured our friendship. It was Abbas alone who had got me a place in the Tanks of the Bombay film stars and in return, I had set out to tear him apart. But Abbas had not let that lose his cool!

We used to shoot at Shree Sound Studios. Rajnikant Pandey, its owner was a master cameraman and his brother Chandrakant Pandey, the sound recordist, had no peer in his profession. No film distributor was prepared to consider a film worth buying unless it was shot at Shree Sound Studios and Chandrakant Pandey had done its recording. At all hours, you found the place swarming with scenario writers, actors, directors, producers and musicians. It was Abbas who had managed to get such a well known studio to let a poor organisation like IPTA shoot its film there. No one else could have done that. We were, however, always afraid that the studio wallahs would one day get fed up with *out* un-ending debates and bickerings and throw us out!

But we were wrong in assuming that they had formed a poor opinion of us IFT A artistes. Far from it, we actually rose in their esteem as the shooting progressed. This was because of the non-personal nature of our quarrels and debates. They probably realised that through all that shouting we were seeking to improve the overall standard of our films. Howsoever bitter the quarrels, we always patched them up in the end and became friends again! Our Bengali colleagues were staying with Abbas in his two-room flat. Many a time we too would descend on him for an overnight stay, especially on those days when after the day's shooting of *Door Chalo*, we had to appear before the cameras at night for *Dharti ke Lal*. Participation in two shooting shifts was in those days a status symbol for an actor. Once we too had not slept a wink for four days and four nights in a row. With so many uninvited guests having planted themselves on the Abbas household, it was not too difficult to imagine the mood of the members of his family.

When more than half the film had been ready, its rush prints were shown in the projection theatre of the studio. Mahesh Kaul, the well-known director, had quietly slipped in to watch the rushes. His verdict, when he came out of the theatre, was, 'I had almost lost faith in our films. I must, therefore, thank you young people for restoring it. Raj Kapoor, who was then an assistant of Kidar Sharma's, also praised the film lavishly. He was yet to achieve the success he did in later life.

It was probably because of the impression that *Dharti Ke Lal* had made on Mahesh Kaul that he subsequently launched a realistic film. The film was *Gopinath*, which had Tripti Mitra (Nee Bhaduri), the heroine of *Dharti ke Lal*, in the lead with Raj Kapoor as her hero. It also went on to become an unforgettable film.

None of us had a car. Despite this 'deficiency' everyone of the studio employees from Rajnikant Pandey himself down to a minor studio hand used to treat us with utmost respect. They would vie with each other to fulfil our smallest wish, even if this meant their leaving the job in hand! In their eyes, we were doing work of national importance and hence were great people.

The community spirit with which we were working came as a breath of fresh air, in the stuffy atmosphere of the studio, where each one was for himself. This is borne out by a number of apparently insignificant incidents, which I can never forget.

To wit, we were shooting a scene on a 'Calcutta street' at dead of night. The hero of the film, an old peasant, is running a high fever and, in his delirium, he sees before his eyes his farm back in his village. 'Ah, my harvest! Look, how grain-laden it is', he shouts at the members of his family and fellow-villagers who are squatting near him. They are his old wife (Usha Sengupta), eldest son (myself), younger son (Anwar) and his two daughters-in-law (Damayanti Sahni and Tripti Bhaduri). Gesticulating wildly, he orders his sons to go and cut it with sickles. He is in a frenzy which does not last long. He drops dead.

The set, which showed the street and the foot-path, was erected in the studio premises. First a long shot was taken with the cameras placed at some distance from the 'street'. This required special lighting arrangements which took a good foul: hours. However, when the next shot was about to be filmed and the cameras were brought nearer to take a close-up of the old peasant, it was found that the lamp on the post under which he lay did not function. Obviously, someone had bungled.

The close-up shot required that a single lamp from that lamp post should shed a pallid glow on the face of the peasant. This had not been switched on for the long shot and hence no one was aware till the last minute that it was blown out. Now that a close-up was to be taken, all the other lights in the studio were switched off. But this one vital bulb which had to function was now refusing to glow!

We were in a fix all right! If the first shot were to be refilmed, this would require another 3 to 4 hours to see to the lighting and the entire shift would come to nought!

As all of us sat there racking our brains, a *mazdoor* came forward with a suggestion which he insisted would solve our problems. This was his plan: Let the peasant's face remain in darkness, to start with. As he starts talking in his delirium and his frenzy rises to a pitch, let a car approach him from a distance with its headlights on. As it comes nearer, the glow of its headlights falling on the peasant's face would be shown to increase. Cut the shot on his dropping dead. The next shot should show his near ones and friends, throwing themselves on the peasant's dead body and as they are wailing and crying, the car should speed past them, with its tail light receding in the darkness!

By any token, this was a brilliant idea. It literally left all of us spellbound, — Abbas, Shombhu, Gupte, myself and cameraman Kapadla. Here was an illiterate *mazdoor* setting right a blunder we intellectuals had committed and in the process he had shown himself to be an artiste.

Ravi Shanker had written the musical score for *Dharti ke Lal*. A lone melancholy air from a *Bansuri* perfectly captured the mood of that scene. It seemed to convey to the viewer the idea of the peasant's departed spirit, winging its way to his beloved farm! That air lent the scene a superb touch. All credit for this scene must, of course, go to that unlettered *mazdoor* — a member of that class, which dare not so much as talk to a member of the 'gentry', let alone discuss anything with him!

It was obviously the lack of any pomposity and hauteur (which money breeds) amongst the members of our unit, that had emboldened the *mazdoor* to come forward with his suggestion. The fact was that members of the proletariat had come to regard our film as their own! At the instance of the Communist Party and the various trade unions and peasants' organisations, many workers and farm hand and their womenfolk and children used to play bit roles in our film, gratis. Indeed hundreds of them had participated in that scene, depicting the trek to the city of impoverished, starving villagers. On the day of the shooting, as early as 4 in the morning, the Bengali girls from IPTA had begun teaching the women participants, who came from a Maharashtra village, the ritual of wearing a saree in the Bengali style, and for four full days the villagers of Kapadne had let the members of the *Dharti ke Lal* unit romp through their farms. Moreover, they treated us as their honoured guests and gave us food and shelter. It was, therefore, all the more a pity that the hopes which the ordinary members of

IPTA had pinned on this film were in the end thoroughly belied. It is the leaders of IPTA who must take all the blame for this, since they could never manage to sink their differences, which, in fact, went on increasing day by day. The opportunists amongst us had formed their own exclusive groups. The fact that film-making necessarily involved money transactions to the tune of several thousands of rupees, apparently proved the undoing of those of our comrades who were not too scrupulous. Thus, what began as a labour of love became eventually a headache for everyone. Abbas disposed of the recording job in a tearing hurry as he had to rush to Lahore, where a fresh film contract was awaiting him. After he had left, our film became an orphan. It was consigned to the shelves to gather dust there. No one had any idea as to what we should do next. And as luck would have it, riots broke out in Bombay on the very day the film was released in that city. A curfew was clamped which fortunately was lifted when a few days later the riots subsided. But the damage had been done. The people were still afraid to venture out of their houses and the cinema hall showing *Dharti ke Lal* would remain almost empty. This was, in fact, the fate of all the films which were released during that fateful week. Indeed this business of film-making is rather like raising a crop. You never know when something will go wrong and all your efforts will come to nought!

However, despite its failure as a commercial film, *Dharti ke Lal* was no doubt a highly artistic film. Whoever saw it had only praise for it. Actually it won more acclaim abroad than in our own country. In one of its journals, the famous English publishing house of Penguins called it a landmark in the annals of the film industry. It was shown throughout the Soviet Union and several other countries included it in their film libraries. True enough, *Dharti ke Lal* was full of defects. Nevertheless, it had also a few laudable features, which were conspicuous by their absence in many other films. For example, even the rich-est producer could not have got such a large number of workers and peasants to work in a film gratis. Moreover, every one of its scenes was infused with humanistic and liberal sentiments. One of the producers said to me after seeing the film, 'You fellows have stolen a march over the Russians themselves in realism!'

It was *Dharti ke Lal* which had paved the way of subsequent films made in the realistic genre, films like Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* and Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*. Alas, Abbas himself went on to discard this genre, which explains the inability of every single of his later films to stand up to *Dharti ke Lal*. And what is more, none of them could give Abbas the sort of prestige which this first film of his had done.

So long as we worked as a team of selfless and humble workers, our films remained a model in co-operation. If only we could continue in the same vein, *Dharti ke Lal* would have led to something more permanent. We could have founded a film society to make patriotic and socially progressive films. But our *kismet* ruled otherwise.

Eleven

By the time *Dharti ke Lal* was ready, my domestic life had changed completely. Gone were the days, when we would stare with longing eyes at ten-rupee notes. Now even those big ones, bearing the charmed figure of a hundred, held no fascination for us. Between the two of us, it was Dammo who used to earn more. She was, however, not given to saving money, nor did she care much for her own comforts. Begum Para, Noorjehan and Baby Naseem were her friends, all of whom were fond of going on long drives in their expensive cars, but for Dammo a bus or a train was good enough! A simple *khaddar* saree was what she always wore and all her earnings, save the house-keeping money, she would donate to national causes.

Indeed everyone was fired with the national spirit in those days. It was as if the masses were caught in a storm! I can never forget the night, when the pro-agonists of Netaji Subhas had stormed the Communist Party's Central Office. They, came in thousands and attacked the seventy odd people—many of them women and children—who happened to be in the office. There was a pitched battle and the staircase leading up to our office was spattered with the blood of our comrades. I myself had been hit by a stone, while I was engaged in taking them to a safer room upstairs. At the end of the melee, my bushshirt and trousers were soaked in blood, both my own and those of my comrades. It was truly a horrible experience to live through. To this day, I carry the wound scar on my forehead like some precious talisman.

And then followed the naval mutiny. All Bombay was convulsed like never before! Hindus, Muslims and Parsis, all of them, rose to a man, and attacked the white *firangis*. Most of the news of heroic deeds came from the Muslim districts of the city. Every house-top flew flags of the Communist and Congress Parties and the Muslim League, rather like ships flying their national colours. The tommies riding in open trucks used to shoot down pedestrians with dum-dum bullets. But the masses were in no mood to heed them. Their enthusiasm was simply magnificent. I vividly remember the day when, accompanied by a colleague from Andhra, I was walking down a

street in midtown Bombay. The crowds had come out to do battle with the tommies, and my colleague was so overcome with emotion that he kept on shouting, 'People are in the streets, comrade. This is a revolutionary situation! Hardly had he said that, when the people started running helter-skelter. Taking their cue, we too rushed into a shop. These Bombayites are indeed a strange people. They seem to be endowed with some uncanny intuition, which tells them in advance when it is going to rain. This enables them to run for cover just before the rain-drops start falling. It is probably this intuition of theirs that told them now that the tommies were about to descend on the street with their guns and, sure enough, even as we were ducking under a shop-counter, the street was spattered with bullets. Though the outrage lasted hardly a minute, a number of them felled a college girl who had taken shelter in a shop a little distance down the street. Needless to say, the poor girl was killed instantly. We carried her body to the office of the Gimi Kamgar Union, where we found the leaders of the Railway Workers debating furiously whether or not the fish plates on the rail-way lines should be removed!

Rightly or wrongly, I have always felt that if, instead of leaving the people in the lurch, and arriving a compromise with the British, our leaders had then come forward to lead the people's revolt, the British Raj would have collapsed in no time. The revolutionary élan of the people was at that time at fever-pitch. Coupled with this, the Indian contingents of the Air Force had gone on strike in support of the naval mutineers. Moreover, there was unrest amongst the ranks of the Bombay Police. In such a situation it was not too difficult to get the Indian army to raise the banner of revolt, much in the manner of Netaji Subhas's Azad Hind Fouj. If this had happened, then the country would not have been partitioned nor would the framework of the old corrupt bureaucracy have survived and continued to hold the people in its vicious grip, as it is doing even to this day.

Our leaders, however, thought it lit to keep themselves away from this mass movement, and enter into negotiations with the British. It is, of course, not proper to hold Gandhiji responsible for this policy of our leaders, since Ahimsa had always been an article of faith with him. In fact, he had repeatedly asked the Congress leaders to relieve him of his 'post' as their political mentor, but Nehru and the other Congress leaders would hear none of it. They had come to depend upon his advice so much, that it had become indispensable for them. Consequently, they were incapable of taking a decision on their own. If only Nehru, the visionary, had then foreseen the horrible consequences of arresting the rising tempo of the revolution! He

himself admitted later that he should have realised the implications of the revolutionary situation then prevailing in the country. He was the most fearless of men and hence could have joined the revolution without the least hesitation but even his revolutionary ardour was at that time at a low ebb. I cannot help saying to myself, 'If Netaji were alive then and living in India!' Surely he would not have remained a silent spectator to the momentous events that were then happening in the country. After all, it was precisely in the hope that such a situation would arise in the country that he had made common cause with the German and Japanese fascists, much against his conscience.

Nevertheless, no categorical statement can be made on this subject. The entire political leadership of our country has been the progeny of the capitalist class, and it is always the proletariat alone which has that compulsive urge to lead a revolution to its *manzil*!

The Communist Party was in those days the most important organisation of workers and peasants. It was just the right moment for the party to seize the initiative from both the Congress and the Muslim League, but it did not avail itself of the opportunity. Instead, it took to towing the line of both these political parties. It was, however, also possible that such a venture on the part of the communists would have proved to be a gamble, since they had come to be branded as traitors, as a result of their support to the Allied war effort. Moreover, the Communist Party was by no means uniformly popular in the country. Hence, instead of hailing the communists as revolutionaries, the people might have turned against them; or come to think of it, by leading the people against the British, the Communist Party would have perhaps got rid of the stigma of being 'traitors' once and for all. But these are all speculations. God knows what turn the events might have taken. History alone can pronounce a definitive judgement on the events of those times!

Both Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Qaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah appealed to the mutineers to give up arms, while the British contrived to make the sailors fight amongst themselves. This was the British Government's way of rewarding the Indian Navy for the help it had rendered them in their hour of need! Thus, the tide of revolution which had bidden fair to drown the British ended up by dividing the ranks of our own countrymen! Before you knew what was happening, the revolution had degenerated into a communal riot.

Callow youths that we then were, we were in no position to grasp the significance of the events of those preindependence days. This was understandable since the great political leaders and even Gandhiji himself

were nonplussed by those events. As for me and the youths of my generation, we were simply dying to throw ourselves into the revolution and we could not care less what happened to us! We were rather like that reckless boatman, who sets sail in the storm with no thought whatsoever about what might happen to his craft.

A film star's life too has to weather storms, small and big. Our house had become in those days a regular venue for meetings of Communist Party workers, on the one hand, and of *filmwallas*—producers, directors, photographers, actors and the like, on the other. All the din and noise which used to reign in our house throughout the day had brought the neighbours to the end of their tether. Moreover, this was exerting a bad influence on my children. But there was no one around, who could have warned us of the danger we were exposing ourselves to. (Even if there was one, we would not have heeded his advice.) In Bombay, every man is so engrossed in his own affairs that he has hardly any time to bother about his neighbours, a situation which you find in every large city. True, the years spent in London had made us familiar with such a situation. London, however, is very different from Bombay. In London we had at our disposal every amenity and comfort that a metropolis could offer its citizens—excellent means of transport, rich food, clean environs, courteous behaviour of its citizens, a hospital in practically every borough of the city, civic centres ready to come to the citizen's aid at any hour of the day or night, duty-conscious policemen, a telephone booth at every street corner in short, every facility that a citizen needs in his daily life. Bombay, on the other hand, has all the disparities of a big city without, however, any of the facilities available in London. Here in no time a minor mishap grows into a calamity. And as luck would have it, our own life had in store for us just such a fate.

Now that we—both my wife and I—had reached stardom, men of wealth were going out of their way to 'cultivate' us. It enhanced their prestige in society if they were seen in the company of film stars. If we shunned their ridiculous parties, they would give donations to the IPTA or the Communist Party and thus try to entice us into their fold. An actor and particularly an actress is after all looked upon as a mere plaything by a member of the bourgeoisie, a fact we were then totally unaware of. Nor did I know that the respect accorded to an actress is not devoid of a touch of contempt! When I once happened to read in the papers that some race-horse owner had named his mares 'Nargis', 'Begum Para' and 'Damayanti', I was incensed beyond words.

‘We had now come to a stage in our married life when Dammo was in dire need of my help and guidance. As her husband, it was my duty to treat her with understanding and respect, which was also her expectation as an artiste and share some of her household chores. But instead of making her life a little less of a burden, I began to harbour a sense of resentment against her. I *was* jealous of her success and the fame it had brought her. When she arrived home from the studio, tired and hungry, I would behave with her as if she had done some wrong! I would expect her to start cooking and washing right away, which I considered to be her real work. In order to parade my own importance, I started devoting most of my time to the IPTA and Communist Party work, the sort of work which was of no real consequence. I was, after all, a man and the social milieu I had grown up in had impressed upon me that a man must always have his say in his house. As for Dammo, she had been brought up to regard the husband as God. All her training and education had centred on the dictum that it is the sacred duty of every wife to be at the beck and call of her husband! She accepted this situation meekly and took upon herself all the responsibility of running the house, a task which was beyond her physical capacity. I now realise what hardships she must have patiently borne and my heart cries out in anguish. Dammo was a price-less jewel, which her parents had entrusted to someone who had no feeling of gratitude or appreciation towards her. Consequently, we were forever caught up in a psychological storm!

Gudia was the next film to be shot at Sree Sound Studios after *Dharti ke Led*. Rajnikant Pandey himself was the producer of this film, while Achutrao Ranade was its director, who later gave up films to devote his whole life to the task of rehabilitating ex-jail birds. He was a very learned man, and a fine gentleman too! He had based the film *Gudia* on the famous Ibsen play, *Doll's House*. Dammo and I were playing the stellar roles in the film.

In one of the scenes, Dammo had to sing a love-song. Its setting was a garden, and I had to sit by her side listening to the song. While they were arranging the lighting, Dammo, Rajnikant and I came out of the garden and stood on the footpath outside, enjoying the fresh air. Presently a big car pulled up at the roadside and we saw K. L. Saigal emerging from it. He was being helped by one of his acquaintances to step out of the car. What a sight he was! We couldn't believe our eyes. Was this old, sickly doddering man the same Saigal, whom only six years ago we had seen on *the President* set so full of *joie de vivre* and fun? My heart sank to see him aged so much in those six years. All his hair had gone grey, he had lost a fearful lot of

weight and was wearing glasses. He was hardly able to support his own emaciated frame, clad in white kurta and pyjamas! It was tragic to see him come to such a pass in the best years of his life.

As we saw the man approach us, leading Saigal by the hand, we advanced towards them and greeted the great artiste. 'How are you Saigal Sahab?' Rajnikant enquired of him. Saigal did not appear to hear the question addressed to him.

Raising his voice, Rajnikant said, 'Let me introduce you to Damayanti Sahni. You know, she had made a name for herself in her very first film. We are going to record a song of hers today.'

The word 'song' had almost an electrifying effect on him. He seemed suddenly to wake up from his reverie. For a considerable time, he stood there with a smile on his lips. He then pulled Dammo towards him and started patting her head lovingly. 'A song? Go ahead, sing, my dear child. There is nothing in the world like a song.'

Those words coming from a man whom Dammo had been worshipping all these years brought tears to her eyes. She knew that she would not be able to control her emotions if she stood there facing Saigal any longer. She ran away from us and disappeared into the studio portals.

To see Saigal in such a terrible condition had an unsettling effect on her. She was too disturbed that day to work. Unable to fight back her tears, she kept on asking me, 'Balraj, do you think Saigal will be no more before long? Can't someone save him?' It was obvious to me that she could not bring herself to accept the cruel fact that Saigal would soon leave this world!

And then not long thereafter I stood watching helplessly as the icy hand of death snatched away both Saigal and Dammo. I was left to fight my battles alone.

Within four months of Dammo's death, India was partitioned and our family was uprooted from Rawalpindi. The house of cards that I had built for myself and Dammo came tumbling down!

*Life is a joke; and all things show it,
I thought so once, but now I know it.*
GEORGE III My Own Epitaph

PART TWO

One

Following Dammo's death, I left for Rawalpindi with the children. Rawalpindi and the surrounding districts were then aflame with the communal holocaust. Human life had ceased to have any value and a wholesale genocide 'of Hindus and Sikhs was in progress. My brother Bhishma was then the Secretary of the Rawalpindi Town Congress Committee, and was engaged in compiling a report on the atrocities that were being committed daily. This job took him to far-flung places in the district and what he saw there was enough to curdle one's blood. At one place, hundreds of women had jumped into a well and thus killed themselves rather than surrender their honour to the goondas. Some had even taken their children along with them on the fatal journey!

In the city of Rawalpindi, the 'Peace Movement' of the Communist Party was in full swing. The comrades were exhorting the leaders of both the Congress and the Muslim League to close their ranks and fight the British together. This appeal evoked a ready response from the people at large, but by this time, the British had succeeded in gaining full control over the situation and were thus in a position to make the Indians dance to their tune.

The sacrifices my comrades were making touched my heart-strings. I began to participate in their peace-keeping activities and thus to forget my personal sorrow. I knew by heart several Prem Dhavan's patriotic songs, which I would sing at street corners to collect a crowd. My comrades would then address them.

The comrades had pinned all their faith on the pro-letariat. All their efforts were directed at keeping the working class districts free from riots. Not only that, they wanted the workers to come forward and defend the city.

Shri Dhanwantari, a colleague of Bhagat Singh's, had specially come to Rawalpindi on a peace-keeping mission. The great man was totally oblivious of the intense May heat. He had even no thought for food, or any other comforts, so engrossed was he in his work! I used to sing those Dhavan songs at his meetings and in the process became quite a singer! From morning till night, we would roam the entire city on our bicycles, taking our message of peace to the people. . Once we cycled twelve miles out of town to hold a meeting of the workers of the Attock Oil Co. It was a 'closed door' meeting, which was attended by party members and their

sympathisers. Comrade Dhanwantari was warned not to expose himself and me so recklessly to danger, in the towns and villages around Rawalpindi, the Muslims were being incited against Hindus and Sikhs. Since the Government officials themselves were accomplices in this, there was simply no question of holding a public meeting. Some of the workers (All the workers of the Attock Oil Company were Muslims) provided us with an escort by cycling with us to the outskirts of the city on our return trip home.

Although caught in the storm, which was then rag-ing around me, I was in no position to grasp the sig-nificance of those events. I had not yet read any of Lenin's works, Marxism teaches one to understand one's environment and shows one the way to change it. In those days, however, I was ignorant of this fact. Hence, I took to interpreting those events in a manner which conformed with my middle-class values, a failing which is, shared by all the young men of that class. My father, of course, knew better. He was convinced that once Pakistan was born, Hindus would find it impossible to live there. A Muslim Mend from Ludhiana used to write to him regularly about the necessity of transferring his lands and other property but Father was not willing to take a decision without consulting me or Bhishma. As for us, we would merely make fun of his misgivings. We used to say, 'Fancy a city calling itself by the ridiculous name Ludhiana, being fit to live in!' and he too would laugh with us. I now feel terribly embarrassed at the thought that he should have put up with any foolhardy plan that we could have thought of. Consequently, he lost his lands and property, whose value ran into lakhs!

I was then in poor health. My doctor had advised me to spend some days in Kashmir. Though the situ-ation there was tense, it was nevertheless free from any communal strife. Maharaja Hari Singh was ruling the state with an iron hand. Sheikh Abdullah, Sadiq, D. P. Dhar and several other leading personalities were behind the bars and the people were very much agitated. Many state officials were secretly in-citing the people to revolt. Even the police were siding with these officials! An unforgettable episode during that Kashmir sojourn was a chance meeting I had at a secret joint with the great poet of Kashmir's *mazdoors*, Abdusitar 'Aasi'. To earn a living, he was working as a weaver's assistant!

Since I had come from Bombay, where the Central Office of the Communist Party was, the Srinagar comrades used to treat me with deference, which was out of all proportion. I, on my part, would also try to live up to it, although I was no match for them in political sagacity. Thanks to the atmosphere in my home and my education at the Government College,

Lahore, I had become an introvert; I had got into the habit of closing my eyes to the events that were happening around me, no matter how momentous they were! Even Marxism could not provide me with a means to get rid of it. I always get nonplussed whenever I find myself in a different situation.

By and large, this failing of mine is shared by many of my fellow-artistes and writers. The traumatic experience of 1947, which was nothing short of a death wave, left us untouched. We have not been able to produce a film which could be said to mirror those catastrophic events faithfully. Nor has any of our writers written a novel, which, steering clear of sentimentality, would describe the horrors people on both sides of the border were subjected to.

After spending a few days in Srinagar, I went to Gulmarg. I forgot all my worries in the beautiful surroundings of that resort.

While at Gulmarg, I received a letter from my dear friend Amritlal Nagar, the celebrated Hindi novelist. It said, producer Virendra Desai had decided to make a film on one of his short stories. He wanted me to play the main role, and that I was to be paid a sum of ten thousand rupees. If the terms were acceptable to me, I should send Nagarji a telegram conveying my approval.

It was in these *very* sylvan environs of Gulmarg that three years ago, Chetan Anand had prevailed upon me to join films, and now a valued friend was trying to entice me once again into the same profession! When your heart is young, it simply cannot resist the glamour of the film world! In fact, Bom-bay's moist air had not agreed with me. Moreover, I could not establish a rapport with the "people of that city, and now that Dammo was also no more, I was unwilling to go once again to Bombay, I had acquired a new interest—Punjabi language and Punjabi literature. I was, therefore, on the look-out for some means of livelihood, whereby I could live permanently either in Kashmir or in Punjab. All the same, just one letter from the film world was enough to make me abandon all my plans!

I was being offered the role of a hero, unsolicited and in the bargain I was going to be richer by ten thousand rupees! This meant, I was on my way to becoming a star! The very thought made me dizzy with happiness!

The end of July 1947 found me in Bombay with members of my family. Leaving Kashmir, we had come down to riot-torn Rawalpindi. A reign of terror was in evidence everywhere in the city. Indeed, people were afraid to walk on the streets. As the train was passing Lahore, I saw outside several

fiercely burning fires which were obviously not a natural phenomenon. But I did not let those sights worry me. Now that I had won a film contract, I turned a blind eye to everything that was happening in my native Punjab, as if I had nothing to do with it!

Gunjan was the film's name. It was Nalini Jaywant's first film after she had stepped into youth. Unfortunately, she had to contend with not one but two leading men! I was the one to whom she loses her heart but it was the 'other man', played by Trilok Kapur, she has to marry! Trilok Kapur was a veteran actor and therefore knew how to throw his weight about. When on the set, he would go out of his way to announce that it was he who was the real hero of the film. Hearing him say that, I used to feel as if I was being deprived of my legitimate right. It was a very disconcerting thought which used to rob me of my sleep. I was only a 'semi-hero'! When would I become a full-fledged one?

In fact, this line of thinking had nothing to do with my role in that film. Character portrayal has a psychological aspect also, a fact I was then unaware of. Nor was I conscious of the necessity of understanding this aspect. Drunk as we were with the heady wine of Marxism, we used then to brand Stanislavsky as a 'bourgeois'. I was by no means innocent of the experience of becoming nervous and tongue tied in front of the cameras. Nevertheless, I still continued to behave like a patient, who instead of taking medical treatment promptly, prefers to hide his ailment in the hope that it will eventually disappear all by itself!

I do not remember now the details of the story of *Gunjan*. I do remember though, that it had all those twists and turns, typical of a story penned by the eminent litterateur. Although I did manage to understand the idea the author wanted to convey through his plot, I was totally blank as to how one went about expressing it through one's acting. Since Nagarji was no actor himself, he was not aware of this failing of mine. If they had got Raj Kapoor or Dilip Kumar to play the role I was playing, *Gunjan* would have become a memorable film. But it is also likely they might have refused to play opposite an unknown heroine.

As the shooting got going, I was 'exposed' and, moreover, Nagarji too became 'devalued' in the producer's eyes. On the set, Nagarji would describe to me in great detail the hidden meanings behind the different situations of the plot. Today I enjoy such a 'briefing' from a writer but in those days, I had not yet learnt to enter into the soul of a character. If I were then adept at this skill, I would have acted the part in a way that would have

brought out the traits of Nagarji's hero. But this was not to be. To this day, I regret not having been able to play the role to Nagarji's satisfaction.

The shooting of a film is a slapdash affair. Every moment is precious and its cost is calculated in terms of so many rupees, annas and pies. The rehearsals of a play, on the other hand, can go on for weeks on end, which affords a new artiste an opportunity to climb one or two rungs on the acting ladder—a facility that is denied to him in films. Moreover, the scenario is never one of a piece. It is filmed haphazardly, regardless of its sequence and the camera sometimes is brought so close to the artiste's face that the viewers can read it like a book. Obviously a naive artiste has no place in the film industry.

That day I went completely blank on the set. My throat went dry and a combination of nervousness and fright seized me. I could follow not a word of what Nagarji was telling me. As if memorising those long dialogues was not enough, I was having to listen to Nagarji's advice too. I was at the end of my tether. If I had a sword then, I would have surely beheaded him. Not even the fact that he was a friend of mine and that it was he who had got me the role in *Gunjan* would have stopped me from doing that!

Producer director Virendra Desai sensed what was going amiss. He took Nagarji aside and left me alone with my thoughts. I must say, this act of Desai's lessened my tension. I heaved a sigh of relief. Since it was Nagarji rather than I, who, in my eyes deserved the blame, I did not suffer any loss of self-respect. Taking advantage of this situation, Desai boosted my confidence and that gave me peace of mind. I somehow managed to remember my lines, which I delivered à la a Hollywood star, and the day's shooting came to an end.

After this incident, Nagarji stopped coming to the studio. It was obvious to me that he was a disappointed man. This was natural enough, since all the high hopes he had entertained about films as an art-form were clearly belied in this very first encounter he had with the mechanics of shooting a film. I knew that like Munshi Premchand, he too had not let the prospect of earning money in films betray his conscience. After having seen me first on the set of *Dharati ke Lal* and later on the *Gudia* set, he had planned to write several film stories for me. It was all because of his personal efforts on my behalf that several producers and directors had signed me for roles in their films. Thanks to his putting in a word for me, they had agreed to pay me money, which by standards prevailing then, was considerable—and this in spite of my being by no means an established star! It was, again, he who was instrumental in prevailing upon Desai to give me the role in *Gunjan*. In

doing me this good turn, he had probably thought that if I got that role, that would take my mind off the memory of my departed wife. The film too was a tragic one, and he must have reckoned that it would spur me on to act with a will!

Virendra Desai was keen to finish the film at the earliest. The film was being shot at the Bombay Talkies Studio, which still retained its lustre, al-though its two leading lights, Devika Rani and Himanshu Roy were no longer associated with it. And it still enjoyed the patronage of those two veteran directors, Nitin Bose and Amiya Chakravarty. In its precincts one often ran into Saadat Hasan Manto, Bhagwati Charan Varma, Upendra Nath 'Ashq' and other writers. Every other day some celebrity of the film world would visit the set. Before *Gunjan* was quite ready, Shashadhar Mukherji signed Nalini Jaywant for his film *Saathi*, which was being directed by Ramesh Sahgal. Nalini was not only a fine artiste, she was very beautiful too! And the German cameraman Wirsching made her look all the more ravishing! ,

Once I was acting opposite David in one of the shots! Being unable to remember my lines, I was making them do retake after retake on me. I could not help asking David, in the end, 'Is there some way to remember one's lines? How is it, you don't make them do a retake on you?'

With infinite kindness, David explained to me what an actor should do when he is facing the cameras. He said, 'Every word in a sentence represents an image. In other words, if you can manage to see before your mind's eye a particular image or picture, a (sentence then; becomes a series of images. When you are delivering your lines, try to evoke these images. You will not then forget your lines!' When I tried this experiment, it proved to be very useful. It was thus David who taught me the first lesson in the art of acting. Thank you, David!

Two

Gunjan 'flopped miserably. Amritlal Nagar gave a wide berth to films and settled in Lucknow to devote himself entirely to literature. He had, however, come to Bombay to attend the premiere show of Gunjan. I still remember that evening I had spent in the com-pany of 'Nalini, Virendra and Nagar on the Juhu beach. The conversation was of a general nature I sat there awaiting the moment when Nagarji would say something about my acting in that film and he knew what was going on in my mind. At long last he said,

Bahut acche, Baltajbhai, bahut acche! (Bravo! Bravo!). Some other time, I shall do a proper assessment of your work in *Gunjan!*'

No doubt, it must have embarrassed him no end to utter those words. His long association with films had taught him one thing, though: one should never criticise the acting of a newcomer since it makes him lose confidence in no time.

I have always wondered whether it would have been all to the good if he had told me then his honest opinion about my acting! And I am still groping for an answer! I must, however, say, those words of Nagarji have always rankled in my mind. Try as I might to delude myself, I still could not be blind to the fact that my acting did have certain blemishes. What were they? Come to think of it, it would have been better if he had told me what they were. That would have spared me this gnawing suspense!

Whenever he has had occasion to refer to me—in his writings or speeches—he has never failed to ex-press his regret at the loss the world of letters has suffered because of my joining films. I myself share this view of his. I have always wanted to become a writer and yet cannot categorically say that Nagarji was fully justified in leaving films or for that matter, I was not at fault in not leaving them! It is, I think, idle to speculate now on the 'heights' I might have reached in the world of letters. However, the years I have spent in the film profession can by no means be called a waste. Films have taught me the art of act-ing and moreover they have enabled me to experience the bliss of being in that psychological state which only an actor can experience! This by itself is some achievement! ‘

Before the year was out, Nalini Jaywant became a leading star. She gave up her one-room flat at Matunga, where she used to cook herself and then husband and wife would eat off the same plate. It used to be a pleasure for me to call on “them, in their tiny flat. They had now built a grandiose bun-galow at Chembur, on which they had spent a fortune. Squandering money like this is typical of every successful film personality! I was a frequent visitor to their new house. Both husband and wife were fond of me and Virendra would show me the various things he had bought to beautify it. All the same, I did not fail to notice that he was no longer his usual jovial self.

The more money they earned, the wider became the gulf between them and eventually they separated. Now, whenever I saw Virendra waiting in a queue at a bus stop, I would turn my face away and walk past him. The evil days on which he had fallen, finally killed him.

Shyam too had built a house next to mine. The news that he had died from a fall while horse-riding for a scene that was being shot for one of his films came as a terrible shock to me. Shyam was a fellow-Rawalpindian and our families were very close to each other. He had great regard for me.

I remember, I was on my way to Chembur that day to express my condolences to members of his family. Since the 'chauffeur' of my motor-cycle had not reported for duty, I had to walk to the bus stop. I believe, I must be the first man in history to keep a chauffeur for a motor-cycle. That in itself is a story, which may be recounted here:

Experience had taught me quite early in my film life, that to arrive at the gate of a film studio on foot was to invite an insulting treatment. The *Durwans* and the guards take a malicious pleasure in making fun of people who come to the studio walking. Dixit, the comedian, always made it a point to get out of his car, when it reached the studio gate to do a *Pranam* to the *Durwan* before entering the studio. This was for old times' sake, when as a novice he had to put up with insults at the hands of the studio gatekeepers.

One day, my friend Mama Phansalkar told me, Avadhut ('V. Shantaram's younger brother) had brand new 5 H-P, AJS motor-cycle, which he wanted to sell. I somehow managed to collect the required amount and bought it. But who would ride the mon-ster? The mere sight of it used to give me the creeps! Mama know how to ride a motor-cycle. Moreover, he was very fond of going on long rides, so he became my 'chauffeur'. He would 'drive' me 'free of charge'; in return he lived and ate at my place. He was jobless in those days, after his return from Lahore, where he had gone to make a film, as an assistant to Khwaja Ahmad Abbas.

Since Mama was not available that day to drive me around, I had to travel by bus to Chembur. In those days the road to Chembur was no more than a dirt-track, bumpy and full of potholes. At Sion, when I got into the Chembur bus, I saw sitting in front of me a lady, whose face seemed familiar. She had played Dammo's friend in the film *Gudia*. She was a Muslim and came from Rawalpindi. Although she was a minor artiste, Dammo used to treat her as her equal. In fact, they had become good friends. With great affection, I bade her 'namaste' with folded hands but she turned her face away! When I reached Chembur's Union Park, I saw there a sea of mourners. I elbowed my way through them and in the process got quite a few bumps myself. I wanted to join the members of Shyam's family, but when I reached them, they too turned their faces away exactly as the lady in the bus had done! Even in mourning, all their attention was reserved only for the high and mighty of the film world!

For me, those days were full of hardships and an-xiety. Following the partition, Father had lost all his property at Rawalpindi and had now taken to roaming about from place to place, without any apparent aim. He could not bring himself to stay at one place for any length of time. Other members of my family were staying with me. My younger brother Bhishma and his wife Sheela were meeting part of the household expertise by dubbing a film for Jayant Desai. As for me, I would go knocking on the doors of either the All India Radio or the Films Division. To add to my troubles, IPTA started floundering, following the 1948 Congress of the Communist Party. IPTA had been a veritable haven for me since, in spite of my failure to make much headway in films, I still had a standing in that organisation. The Ranadive line of the Communist Party now laid down that Jawaharlal Nehru had become a stooge of the Anglo-American imperialists. The party had branded the entire bourgeoisie as enemies of the working classes and the country. Instead of accepting the reality of India's independence and rallying to the Congress Government, it had called upon its followers to rise in rebellion against the Government. It launched a campaign to rid its ranks, as well as *its* front organisations, of every bourgeois trace. Those who till yesterday were respected persons became traitors overnight. Several members were expelled from the party on one pretext or another, some left the party when faced with government reprisals, yet others quit without formally announcing their decision to do so. Amongst the latter were eminent colleagues like Khwaja Ahmad Abbas.

I too could not make head or tail of this new party line. However, after having wrapped Dammo's dead body in the red flag of the party, it had become an inseparable part of my life. Moreover, it was the training I had received in the party that had taught me to give rational thinking precedence over mere revolutionary élan. But now, I reversed my order of priorities and, carried away by enthusiasm, wrote a play *Jadoo Ki Kursi*. Although it was published in my name, it was, in fact, a joint effort with Rama Rao, who was then the General Secretary of IPTA, collaborating with me. The play devastatingly lampooned Jawaharlal Nehru and his politics, I myself had played the lead role in that play, which was directed by Mohan Sahgal. The play succeeded beyond our expectations. The audience used to roar with laughter. Krishan Chander had seen it eleven times!

People who have seen it ask me even today for its manuscript. I cannot, however, bring myself to tell them how ashamed I am of that *faux pas* of mine! I feel mortified at the thought that an insignificant person like me should have had the cheek to ridicule a great savant like Nehru! Years ago I

had burnt all the copies of that unfortunate play, and all I remember now is its bare outline.

In those days, no film producer was prepared to give me a role in his film. My friends, however, were ever ready to come forward with help and guidance. On Virendra Desai's recommendation, Mahesh Kaul sent for me and gave me a screen test, which meant I had to say a few lines, standing in front of the camera. The moment I approached the camera, I became stiff with nervousness, which was a 'repeat performance' from my *Gunjan* days. By now, I had taken a terrible fright for the camera.

The Bombay film world is a small one, where news spreads in no time. Shahid Lateef had promised me a good role in his film *Buzdil*. Indeed, a tailor had already made clothes for me. As luck would have it, just a day before the *mahoorat*, my "fame" came to his ears and he offered me instead a very minor role. I could no more countenance such an insult and left the film. In my eyes, Sahid Lateef became the villain of the piece!

My dear friend Ayub, too, helped me get a role in the film *Hulchul*. He had asked his brother Dilip Kumar to recommend me to its producer—K. Asif in *Gunjan*, Trilok Kapur was Nalini Jaywant's husband, while I was her lover. Now in *Hulchul*, I became Nargis's husband, while Dilip Kumar was courting her. Till the shooting of the film started, I was rejoicing at the thought that this film too had two heroes and that I was one of them.'

I had to play a jailor in the film. K. Asif was given to doing everything in a grand style. One day he took me to the Arthur Road prison, so that I could study at close quarters the inside of a jail. The jailor sahab was waiting in his office to receive us. First, he showed us different kinds of uniform. We had with us a tailor, who was asked to look at them carefully. He then proceeded to measure me for my uniform. Later we went round the cells to see how the prisoners lived.

This was in early 1949. Hardly a fortnight had elapsed, since my marriage to Tosh. We were then in the midst of rehearsals of *Signalman Dulee*, a play by Balwant Gargi. Tosh was playing the signalman's wife, while I was the director of the play. That day, as we were halfway through the rehearsal, a messenger called to inform us that both myself and my wife were required to participate in a procession, which the Communist Party was taking out from its Parel Office. We rushed to Parel 'immediately on my motor-cycle. We found a meeting of party workers in progress with a disconcertingly large number of policemen in attendance, but we ignored them. At the end of the meeting, when the procession took the road I joined the men-marchers,

while Tosh joined the women. Hardly had we marched a few steps, when there was com-motion all around. The police had launched a *lathi* charge and soon thereafter they opened fire. I was arrested while shouting slogans. While I was being taken to a police station, I kept wondering about Tosh's fate.

I spent the initial two months in the Bareilly Jail. Thereafter, I was given the 'A' class and transferred to Bombay's Arthur Road prison. Whenever the prison's jailor ran into me, he would stare at me intently and then say, 'I have seen you somewhere before!' What could I say to him? The more often I told him that he was making a mistake, the stronger became his conviction that it was not my first 'trip' to the *jail* and that it was necessary for him to pay special 'attention' to me!

Three

I used to think that a jail must be a very romantic and mysterious place, but it turned out to be quite a different kettle of fish! No one need have any illu-sions about the barbarity of the Government which must lock up human beings like so many beasts to perpetuate its rule!

People who find themselves in prison cells are, on the whole, either paupers or those who have had the impertinence to take up the cudgels on behalf of the poor of the land. Sociologists believe that it is mainly poverty that makes a man commit a crime. In other words, a man's greatest crime is to be poor. This is brought home to you the moment you step into the precincts of a jail. Even in a prison cell a rich man can enjoy all the comforts he is used to in the outside world, which is, of course, by no means the case with a penniless jail-bird. As free men, the poor can at least give expression to the injustice so-ciety does to them and thus make themselves heard. However, once they are confined within the four walls of a prison, they might even be killed and yet the outside world will not have heard of the out-rage!

As an 'A' class prisoner, I could join my other comrades in the jail and share with them the facilities which went with that class. The ground floor was occupied by petty criminals. One day, about fifty young lads were hauled in and lodged in a small room below our cell. Some of the prisoners there told me, every third month, the police rounded up vagrant boys, much in the manner of the municipal employees catching pie-dogs. After locking them up for two to three days, these boys are then put on buses and taken to

some secluded spot miles away from the city and let free. Some return home, while others go back to Bombay in search of work.

Later that night, when the main gate of our barrack had been bolted, and we were trying to sleep, a melancholy wail came from downstairs. It was obvious that one of the boys was crying. He was probably pining for his mother or he might be terrified of the darkness in the cell or perhaps a colleague of his was thrashing him. Anyway, when the sound of wailing showed no sign of abating, we knocked on the door of the neighbouring cell and thus tried to attract the attention of the warder. The jailor was called. In good faith, he told us not to worry, since the boy had only a stomach ache and that a doctor had been sent for.

After a while, the wailing stopped. Apparently, the doctor had, arrived and the boy had responded to his treatment!

Next day we came to know that the boy had died sometime during the night through the bursting of his appendix. They could not fetch the jail doctor, since, being "a Saturday night, he had gone away to see a film and the jailor had not thought it necessary to call in an outside doctor; or perhaps he had no authority to do so.

One day the jailor summoned me to his office. When I arrived there, I found K. Asif also in the room. As soon as they saw me, they burst out laugh-ing. I realised that the jailor now knew, where he had seen me first!

K. Asif had managed to procure a peculiar order from the police commissioner. Whenever they wanted me at the studio, I might be allowed to go there under police escort.

The 'A' class had already made my life in jail quite comfortable and now this order made it almost a bed of roses! It is always a prisoner's greatest ambition in life to feast his eyes on the goings-on in the outside world. In the compound of our barrack, there was a high wall, from the top of which one could see the cars and the upper stories of the double-decker buses plying on the road below. All of us would await our turn in a queue to climb that wall to get a glimpse of the free world.

But, that was a thing of the past! I could now spend a whole day in the outside world! Naturally, I became an object of envy not only, for my colleagues but also for the entire prison fraternity!

The day I had to report for the shooting, all the inmates would become animated. It was as if everyone had suddenly got film fever! I then used to be flooded with all manner of requests. Someone wanted a bottle of scented hair oil, or a tin of tooth powder; a film-fan wanted me to get him a

photograph of Nargis and Dilip Kumar; or I might be asked to pro-cure a packet of tea, or a particular brand of *bidis* or cigarettes. I would then arrive at the studio carrying in my pocket a long list of all these odds and ends. K/Asif would hand it over to his assistant and by evening, the 'cargo' would be delivered at the studio for me to carry it back to the jail!

The jailor himself used to find this errand-running a source of amusement. The fact that one of his wards was going to play a jailor's role in a film had no doubt added to his responsibility. Before sending me off to the studio, he would size me up, see if I was clean shaven, and give me several instructions. He even accompanied me to the studio on one or two occasions.

While leading this 'double life' I was witness to several peculiar incidents. To wit: Being a fellow-traveller of the Communist Party, Sahir Ludhianvi was in those days having to dodge the police. Having heard that I was shooting that day, he came to see me at the studio. But the sight of a police officer pacing up and down the set scared him and he took to his heels. Later he came to know that the police officer was, in fact, I myself! (A police officer's uniform is very much like a jailor's.)

Government departments have their own way of working. On the day of shooting, my 'escort' used to bring me to the studio at six in the morning, al-though the actual shooting started at 9.00 a.m. Those three hours would hang heavily on me. I would see very few familiar faces and even if I happened to spot some acquaintance, he would give me the cold shoulder because of the dread of the police.

Raj Kapoor was shooting his film *Barsaat* at that studio (Today's Roop Tara Studio). Once when I reached the studio in the early hours of the morning, I found Raj getting ready to go home after finishing the night shift. His colleagues had already left. When he saw me, he came to the bench, where I was sit-ting with my 'escort' and joined us. Hailing a canteen boy, he asked him to bring tea. I thought he was doing all this out of sympathy for me, but sometime later, I realised that he had come to me not to offer sympathy but to see if he could get some from me! He had no idea where I had come from that day, nor indeed who my 'colleagues' were. They were a police inspector and a constable in plain clothes. Raj Kapoor was under the impression that we had been watching the shooting of his film throughout the night. He took it as a compliment and that put him in a mood to talk. It is very characteristic of the man, that whenever he is making a film, he puts his whole heart and soul into it. It was obvious to me that he was dead beat, after having worked all night, but that did not deter him from launching into a long analysis of his film and giving expression to the various difficulties he

was having to face! Finally, after unburdening his heart to us, he bade us good-bye. I should have liked him to ask me, how I was getting on, since I on my part was also in need of someone who could give me sympathetic hearing. My wife was then seriously ill and I had been re-used parole to see her. I felt very much distressed that day as I sat there awaiting the start of the shooting.

People working in the world of films are rather self-centred. Ayub and my other friends were well aware of this fact. They would, therefore, advise me to hang about studios although I might not have any-thing to do there. They said, I should for ever be on the look-out to 'catch the eye' of the producers!

Today, I have no hesitation in endorsing this view of theirs. Our producers and directors are given to doing everything on the spur of the moment. For instance, everything hinges on the OK from a 'star'. The moment that is obtained, the producer, will set about planning the other details of the film in *a* tear-ing hurry. And one never knows when the 'star' will say that magic word. A meeting is then convened hastily in the producer's office and whoever may happen to loiter about in the studio compound is caught hold of and given a role, and that is that!

Moreover, in this celluloid world, every man looks down upon everyone else. True, a *flmwallah* will be all smiles and kindness when talking to you, but you can be sure, in his heart of hearts, he will be wishing plague on your house! The moment you are out of his sight, you cease to exist for him, and he heaves a sigh of relief and happiness! Consequently, if you are a successful film actor, you must see to it that your friends and colleagues are denied this 'pleasure*.

In those early days I was, of course, not wise in the ways of the film world. Although with my motor-cycle I could have easily reached the far-flung studios, I considered it *infra dig* to hang about them, hat in hand. I could not forget that I had come away from London, leaving a good job there, nor that I was a son of a rich father. Old habits do die hard!

It was my stint in jail which eventually made me aware of these wrong notions of mine. It was the months of August. Bombay was being buffeted by the tumultuous monsoon showers. As usual, a police van had brought me to the studio gate. In spite of re-peated honkings of the horn, the 'Lala' would not open the gate. At long last, we saw him running towards the van in driving rain. He was furious with us, for having made him come out of his 'cabin' in such a deluge and he minced no words in telling us what he thought of us.

The inspector cut him short and ordered him imperiously to open the gate. The man cooled down and said, 'Don't you know the studio is closed today? Nargis's amma passed away last night!'

I was shocked to hear the news. It was only two weeks ago that I had met Jaddan Bai, and I had found her hale and hearty. She was not only the mother of the greatest star of our film industry, but was herself a fine artiste, endowed with a striking personality. I do not think I have come across a lady who was more kind-hearted or soft-spoken. When-ever I had a shooting date, she would come to the studio to watch me act. She had great sympathy for me and moreover was very progressive in her outlook. She was so considerate, that she used to bring my wife and children to the studio on some pretext or other, so that I could meet them in the make-up room. Naturally, her sudden death from a heart-attack left me dazed.

The inspector coolly ordered the driver to drive us back to the jail. That made me all the more uneasy. After all, I had been looking forward to this one day of 'freedom' so eagerly! When the van had emerged from the jail gate, I was entertaining fond hopes of seeing my children and my ailing wife Tosh. I also wanted to do so many things in those few hours of freedom, besides buying all those odds and ends for my friends and colleagues in the Jail. Moreover, I could not bear the thought that I should have to return 'home' without having a last 'darshan' of the noble lady. No amount of pleading with the inspector, however, proved of any avail. His refrain was 'Orders are orders. Since there is no shooting today, you shall go right back to the jail.' Finally, I hit upon a novel idea. I said to him, 'Do you realise that to-day all the top artistes of the film world will be at Nargis's house? You will have an opportunity to rub shoulders with Dilip Kumar, Kamini Kaushal, Raj Kapoor, Motilal, Bharat Bhushan, Begum Para, Nalini Jaywant, Nasir and many other stars. I could also introduce you to them. I promise you, we won't wait there longer than five minutes!' 'That is all very well, but you communists are treacherous fellows. What if you took advantage of the crowd there and gave me the slip? I will also lose my job!' he countered. Putting on an act, I said, 'Look, you have your revolver on you. Besides, there are two constables to take care of me. Let them by all means hold me by the arm, while we are there!' That did the trick! Our van took the road leading to Nargis's house.

Three long months had elapsed since I had last seen the magnificent expanse of the Arabian Sea. As the van turned into Marine Drive, and I feasted my eyes on the roaring waves of the sea, I felt strangely exhilarated.

Nargis's house was overflowing with mourners. Following Islamic practice, they would go home one by one after offering their condolences to her and other members of the family. But I stayed put. The inspector, too, was overawed by the sight of so many film stars.

Standing there in the midst of so many friends and colleagues, I realised that I had become almost a stranger to them. The way they were all looking at me, I might have been a corpse, which had suddenly emerged from a coffin! Durga Khote was the only artiste, who had the decency to talk to me, but she too was unaware of the fact that I had been jailed! The hour or so I spent that day at Nargis's house made a different man of me. I resolved never to leave the world of films. Some day, I must make it feel the impact of my personality.

Not that the fact that I had been arrested and on shooting days would be brought to the studio under police escort had gone unnoticed in the film world. This happening was indeed being discussed everywhere, but it was of no earthly use to me. If on the other hand, I was a famous star, this jail term of mine would 'have created a sensation, press reporters would have then followed me right up to the jail-gate to photograph me. They would have written long, spicy articles for their papers, describing my life behind the bars. But it was obviously useless to give publicity to an artiste like me, who was not in the top bracket! Indeed, I was not entitled to it why would any producer bother about an artiste who could not be relied upon to report for the shooting on time? And, moreover, it was a fashion in those days to prefix the word 'communist' with all manner of derogatory adjectives.

K. Asif had his own way of planning a shooting schedule. Neither money nor time played any part in his scheme of things. Every time I arrived at the studio, I would find a new twist given to the screen-play of *Hulchul*. As it was, the vicissitudes of life and the dread of camera had played havoc with my nerves, and now the atmosphere in the studio virtually snapped them. I began losing all sense of proportion.

Once, while I was being made up for a shot, I fainted through sheer exhaustion. I was in such a condition that I would have gladly embraced the gallows rather than face the camera. True, at the time of rehearsals, I would have all my wits about me, but when the time came to do the shot, I would simply go to pieces! They would then have to do retake after retake. I would have the sickening feeling that all my fellow-artists were making fun of me! No matter how hard I tried to ignore them, I just could not concentrate on the job in hand. It was as if the doors of the acting profession were slammed shut in my face!

One of the scenes was like this: Nargis and I are a newly-wed couple. I, the jailor, arrive home from office. Dilip Kumar, a convict, who is serving a life-term, is detailed to work in the garden of my bun-galow. As we are chatting over a cup of tea, Dilip Kumar appears in the door with a bouquet in his hand. He has come to felicitate us on our marriage. The bouquet is his wedding present to us. I finish my tea and go into our bedroom to take off my jailor's uniform and change into *mufti*. The two are now left alone and Dilip starts pouring out his heart to his lady-love ...

During the shot whenever my eyes met those of Dilip and Nargis, I would read in them pity for me. That used to unsettle me! Today, however, I know what was hidden behind that 'pity'.

Right till the moment when the camera was train-ed, Dilip and Nargis would be relaxed and make light conversation but the moment the shot began, they would enter the souls of their respective roles. I, however, could never manage to be one with my role. I too would try my best to act naturally with-out, however, realising that no actor could achieve spontaneity in his acting, unless he entered the soul of his role. Being unaware that this was a psychological process, demanding mental discipline from an actor, I used to think that while Dilip and Nargis were acting artificially, it was I who was acting naturally! Actually, it was the other way round.

As luck would have it, my wife had come to the studio that day to watch the shooting. Any number of retakes were taken. I would either forget to say my lines or leave my tea undrunk. I was making a fool of myself.

At long last, Oza and Asif managed to take the shot somehow, and my ordeal was over. The camera was now trained on Dilip and Nargis who started acting the lovers with consummate ease. I, the gran-dee of IPTA, who had till then looked down upon film artistes, stood there fascinated at the high degree of professional competence these two artistes were displaying! I was properly cut down to size. I felt, I had miles to go before I could come anywhere near their *niveau* of acting.

My wife had only recently come from England. Once, while I was directing *Signalman Dulee*, she had told me not to behave towards the artistes like a dictator. She had said, 'A director is not supposed merely to make his artistes dance like so many marionettes. An artiste's inspiration must come from within himself and in support of her argument, she quoted Stanislavski, whom I used to consider a bour-geois upstart!

I had shouted at my wife and told her to shut up. Today, I bow my head in shame at my stupidity.

When the shot was over, I went to Dilip Kumar and, in all humility, begged of him to tell me how he managed to make his roles so very life-like! I remember to this day, what Dilip Kumar said by way of a reply, 'Whatever I have learnt of acting is partly through watching others and partly through the tips given by friends.' His evasive reply disappointed me. He had seen with his own eyes that I was floundering miserably as an actor and yet he had not thought it *fit* to come to my rescue!

However, now that I myself am no longer a struggling actor, I too have learnt the art of giving evasive replies to my younger fellow-artistes. TO wit: the other day I ran into Kabir Bedi on the beach. Both his parents have been great friends of mine for ages. In the course of our chat, Kabir Bedi said, 'I enjoy working with Raj Khosla. He has a knack of making me act naturally. With him directing me, I now no longer feel self-conscious before the camera.'

'That is because Raj Khosla is a great director.' I said.

'Quite. But what does one do when your director happens to be a mediocre man? You must have worked with all kinds of directors.'

'Well' I said, 'it is true that an actor does get rather nonplussed when his director is not quite up to the mark.'

That answer must have told Kabir I wanted to put a stop to the discussion. What else could I do? To make any categorical statement about art is as hazardous an exercise as tight-rope walking.

When eventually I came out of the jail at the end of a six-month term, I was exhausted—both mentally and physically. It is not necessary here to elaborate on the circumstances under which I was released. One thing, however, must be mentioned: My coming out of jail meant that I was now no longer welcome in IPTA, which had been the only place I could call my own in the vast metropolis of Bombay.' In their eyes, I had become a traitor and a renegade. Although I was reluctant to accept the charge, it nevertheless broke my spirit. I felt I had become old in the prime of youth.

The shooting of *Hulchul* continued even after my release from jail. During the lunch-break, Qza, Asif, Dilip Kumar, Yaqub and other artistes would some-times ask an 'extra', one Badruddin, to entertain them with his mimicry. He used to be really good as a 'drunkard', or a pavement vendor, who collects a crowd through his 'oratory', to sell them his home-made 'medicines'.

One day things came to such a pass that they made me terribly dejected. I felt I had to talk to someone to chase away my blues.

I went to Badruddin and opened out my heart to him. During our talk I asked him, 'How much do they pay you here?'

'Five rupees a day, one of which is taken away by the supplier.'

'Do these four rupees also include your fee for putting on those mimicry acts?' 'Oh no!' He looked embarrassed as he said that. 'No? Then aren't you ashamed of behaving like an ass in front of those fellows?'

All the six months I had been in jail, none of my friends, whether from the films or other walks of life, had ever helped any member of my family financially. I was thus taking out my bitterness on Badruddin.

'You are right, sahab! But I am helpless, I can't possibly displease the big bosses!'

'Nonsense! I will see that you get the sort of work you really deserve,' I said pompously, 'provided you learn to value the talent you possess. These good-for-nothing cads are incapable of appreciating it!' It was the same Badruddin who later went on to become famous as Johnny Walker.

Four

Hulchul gave me my first chance to work with famous artistes and producers, which in several ways proved very instructive too! Among the things I witnessed during those days were; the reckless manner in which the movie grandees squander their money on the various pleasures of life; the financiers and distributors kowtowing to them; stupid yes-men influencing their every decision, while honest, hard-working men are forced to eat humble pie and to go begging to these high and mighty of the film world for their salaries.

I also realised that these people had their own fields of influence, which operated like magnetic fields, trap-ping into their fold those unwary people who had been bitten by the film bug, and thereby ruining their lives-

I myself felt that I was exposing myself to this danger. Ayub, too, seemed to be going my way. Dilip Kumar and Kamini Kaushal were then at the peak of their careers and their love affair was the talk of the town. It was understandable that this situation, in which his younger brother Dilip was in-volved, should cause anxiety to Ayub. However, when this love affair became a subject of conversation between us it clouded our friendship. One

thing led to another and we became alienated from each other. That also put a stop to the cordial relations between our two families.

It, of course, never occurred to me that Ayub would be no more in a couple of days. If I had the slightest inkling of his impending death, I would have brushed aside all my selfishness and narrow-mindedness and showered on him all my love and affection. But fate ruled otherwise. What a fine, sensitive person he was! I fondly cherish the memory of that dear friend of mine.

In some mysterious way, my children came to know of my financial predicament. One day, when I came home in the evening, I heard Parikshit tell his little sister Shabnam,

‘Why must people waste their money on crackers? They are, after all, such useless things!’

I remembered that the next day was Diwali. The neighbourhood children had already started firing crackers. Those words of my son touched me deeply. I turned back and headed straight for a friend’s house. I borrowed fifty rupees from him and returned home with a boxful of crackers and lots of *mithai*!

Parikshit was then a boy of ten. I had agreed to let him play the juvenile counterpart of the role Dilip Kumar was to play in *Hulchul*. As a token of friend-ship to K. Asif, I had, however, made it a condition that this should be ‘gratis’. Subsequently, Nitin Bose offered to give Parikshit a role in his film, *Deedar* on a fee of Rs.1500. My wife was totally against Parikshit’s acting in films, since it was affecting his studies. But I insisted that he accept this role, as we were in need of money. I took my son into confidence and talked to him like to a friend. I laid bare before him the true state of affairs and said he should consider himself the master of the house that month since it would be his earnings that would go into the running of our household. Parikshit listened to me in silence.

I do not know, however, whether it was the proper thing to do from the psychological point of view.

It was necessary that someone accompany Parikshit to the studio and bring him home in the evening. I, however, shied away from the prospect, since I thought it below my ‘dignity’ to chaperon my son and watch him act from the sidelines. That would have made me, in the eyes of the studio employees, a jobless father living on the earnings of his son!

I consoled myself by saying that since both Nitin Bose and Dilip Kumar considered Parikshit their own son, they would look after him. It was also

comforting to see him in high spirits whenever he returned home from the studio.

One day, while riding past Central Studios on my motor-cycle, I dropped in to see Parikshit. The set presented a very awe-inspiring sight... A dark stormy night in a jungle. Parikshit, 'an Innocent orphan' is caught up in the storm and rain. He cries for help. His is literally 'a voice in the wilderness' since nobody is around to come to his rescue. The fury of the wind is such that a large branch of a giant tree breaks and lands squarely on his head 'blinding him for life'... Deedar went on to become a hit. It celebrated a jubilee in almost every large city of the country. I have no doubt that the scene I have described here must have brought tears to the eyes of millions of viewers. However, far from shedding any tears, my eyes had become red with anger, as I stood there watching that scene being shot!

Large electric fans had been brought to the set to simulate a storm. The air they generated kicked up a lot of 'dust' as in a storm and other objects were also seen flying about the set. To protect themselves from possible injury, the director, cameramen and technicians were wearing 'gas masks' over their faces, but no one had a thought for the little boy who had to weather the storm.

The moment I realised this, I went straight to Nitin Bose, and started taking him to task for exposing my son to danger, Bose was a very mild-mannered man and he listened to me patiently. It was really the production department's responsibility to see to the safety of everyone on the set. However, Bose said he was sorry for the lapse and finished the shot as early as possible, taking all necessary care.

Mahesh Kaul was also there on the set, while the scene was being shot. I sat in a corner dejected. I could not help wondering what would have happened to my boy if I was not there! Mahesh Kaul seemed to be trying to 'place' me. He appeared surprised to see that an ordinary artiste should have the cheek to shout at Bose—an unheard of thing! There are many poor people who are forced to let their children work in films, no matter how harsh the conditions under which they have to work.

'One day, Madhubala's father honoured me by a visit. I thought he had come to offer me a role in his film but it was Parikshit whom he wanted. Trying not to look disappointed, I politely declined his offer.

'The boy's studies will be affected,' I said. For a considerable time my guest sat there, looking at me with those kindly eyes of his. He struck me as a fine, upright Punjabi gentleman. Finally, he said, 'Beta, like you, I am also

a father. *I* too have gone through many vicissitudes of life. They have taught me that unless you have money, you can not hope to call anyone your friend. And what use is today's education to anyone? I ask you. I have seen your boy act. He looks a darling on the screen. Let just one of his films get released and producers and directors will flood you with offers of ten and twenty thousand rupees. Moreover, a child artiste's work in a film hardly lasts a week. He can thus work in scores of films simultaneously and within a couple of years, you will forever be rid of your financial worries. You can then engage any number of private teachers to coach your son at home! Do think over this proposal! It is all to your good. There is no hurry, though. Consult your wife and then let me know!'

'Khansaab,' I said cautiously, 'I am grateful to you for your advice, but I must tell you, I have made up my mind not to let anything interfere with my son's education.'

'*Achha!* As you please.'

After he had left, I spent hours musing over Khan saab's advice. Was I, after all, doing the right thing? I tormented myself no end!

Looking back on that incident, I now feel I was by no means all that hard up! True, I was finding the going hard but it wasn't a hopeless situation.

In those days my wife Tosh and I were engaged in dubbing a Russian film in Hindi. Every morning, after seeing the children off to school, we would pack a dry lunch and ride on my motor-cycle to the Famous Studios building, for the recording job. In the same building, Chetan Anand had rented floor space, where he had set up the office of his Nav Ketan Film Company. This brought the two of us once again together. He invited me to write the screen play and dialogues of his next film, an assignment which I accepted gladly. Guru Dutt, who was a friend of Dev Anand's, was to direct the film.

Guru Dutt was then an assistant of Gyan Mukherji's. At Almora, he had taken -dancing lessons from Uday Shankar. He also spoke excellent Bengali. Both he and Sahir Ludhianvi were making their debuts in that film, the latter as a screen poet. The film was *Baazi*, which later went on to become a hit.

In Hindi films, the writing of a screen play has always been treated on an ad hoc basis, which is the very antithesis of the way films are planned in foreign countries. In the titles of these films the pride of place is given to the screen play and its writer, followed by the name of the story on which it is based and the name of the story-writer.

The Hindi films, on the other hand, set great store by the story. It is only after the general outline of the story has been laid down that the screen-play writer comes into the picture. And all he does is to write a 'scene'! After all, the 'scenes' have been written, the dialogues of the players are 'filled in!' Indeed, our producers have come to place so much faith in the story that more often than not the 'scenes' and dialogues are left unwritten till the very day a par-ticular set is to be erected.

It is not, therefore, a rare thing to find the cameraman ready with his lighting, while the dialogue is still being improvised! No wonder, then, cha-racter portrayal is relegated to a backseat in our films.

Shashadhar Mukherji was then enjoying a great reputation as a 'box-office wizard'. It was believed that no film of his could ever fail. His formula was based on the principle that the screen play should necessarily be so fashioned as to make it artificial and 'rickety'. That would make the viewers impa-tiently wait for a song or a dance. He did not want them to get too engrossed in the story since they would then find a song or a dance an unwanted intrusion, a prospect which would mar the chances of the film becoming a box-office hit! Indeed, songs have now become the one single factor that ensures the success of a Hindi film!

I had no idea how far Guru Dutt was inclined to share Mukherji's views. Nevertheless, he no doubt took considerable interest in filming song and dance scenes. In his Order of priorities, a screen play came only after such a scene. Moreover, he had had to struggle to get this chance to direct *Baazi*. Conse-sequently, he was keen on starting the shooting at the earliest.

I had, however, other ideas on how a film should be planned. I had found Guru Dutt's story, which was to form the basis of my screen play, too flimsy. I wished to present the characters and situations in terms of values I had imbibed through my study of theatre and literature. I considered it a grave mis-take to write a scene and its dialogues separately. In fact, I looked upon a screen play as the trunk of a tree, which in due course would sprout branches and leaves (i.e., the various scenes and the dialogue). I, therefore, demanded a full six months to write it. Guru Dutt had thus perforce to wait for six months, before he could start shooting the film. That put him in a quandary. Since I was a friend of Chetan's, he could not possibly show his annoyance at this delay. The prospect of having to remain inactive for such a long period was no doubt eating his heart out. He wanted the film to be taken on the floor right away. I could then take my own sweet-time over the writing of the scenario! I, however, held my own. I knew that once the shooting started, I would be quite helpless.

Those were the days full of hectic activity, arguments and counter-arguments. Many were the all-night sessions, devoted to discussing and planning a scene. For days on end, Guru Dutt would plant himself in my house or alternately I would go and make myself at home in his Matunga flat. His mother had come to like me very much.

Eventually, we reached an impasse over the climax of *Baazi*. Try as we might, we could not find a way out, so we decided to consult Zia Sarhadi. In no time did he suggest a plausible end to the film. True, he had borrowed the idea from some old American film; all the same, it fitted into our story perfectly. We were overjoyed at this windfall and, very much wanted to celebrate the occasion over a bottle of whisky. Neither of us, however, had any money, and as for Zia, he was more 'broke' than the two of us put together!

Years ago, Zia had seen me act in an IPTA {Indian People's Theatre} play. He remembered the play (*Sadak ke Kinare*) that evening. Next day he went to Seth Chandulal Shah, the owner of Ranjit Movie-tone, and read to him the story of his *Hum Log*, which he had written for K. Asif, (in the meanwhile they had fallen out.) Sethji liked it so much that he got Asif to part with it.

However, Sethji found himself in a fix when he came to know that Zia now wanted me to play the lead role, which he had originally written for Dilip Kumar. Sethji had heard of my 'reputation' and when he met me in person, he appeared to sink in utter despondency!

Whenever I passed the Mahim district of Bombay on my motor-cycle, I would invariably see Badru there at some street-corner or other. Sometimes he would stop me and remind me of my promise, which, of course, I had not forgotten. In fact, it was for Badru that I had written a drunkard's part in *Baazi*. However, my problem was how to get the producer and the director of the film to accept Badru for the role!

Finally, I hit upon a novel idea which I explained carefully to Badru. Next day, as we—Chetan, Dev, Guru Dutt and I—sat in Chetan's cabin, discussing "the script of *Baazi*, there was a commotion in the outer office. Apparently, a drunkard had forcibly entered the office and was bothering the clerks. Presently, the intruder appeared at the door of the cabin. Walking right in, he went straight to Dev Anand and started talking nonsense to him. All of us there found the way the man was making a fool of himself excruciatingly funny and we burst out laughing. For well over half an hour he entertained us and the rest of the office staff with his pranks. At last, Chetan

decided that enough was enough. He ordered that the man be thrown out bodily! At that point, I asked Badru to offer a 'salaam' to his 'audience'!

And lo! The *Sharabi* sobered down instantly! The change in the man was so sudden that my colleagues could hardly believe their eyes! It is a measure of Badru's acting talent that he keeps the bottle, which is such an inseparable companion of his on the screen, miles away from him in private life!

I found Chetan looking askance at me! When I told him that Badru's performance was a 'make-believe' and that the whole thing was 'stage-managed' by me, he gave the role to Badru without the slightest hesitation.

That was the beginning of Badru's glorious screen career. His millions of fans, however, know him by the name Johnny Walker. After *Baazi*, Johnny Walker never looked back again. That small role brought him into the limelight and within a year he reached the pinnacle of success and popularity, leaving me way behind in the rat

In the world of films, it is not enough for a race aspiring artiste merely to wait for the right opportunity. While he is thus marking time, he must also make himself familiar with the finer points of acting, so that he may not be found wanting when opportunity knocks at his door!

Since Guru Dutt had wanted Geeta Bali to play the dancer in *Baazi*, we went to her bungalow at Versova one evening to read to her the script of the film. We had to wait since she had not yet returned home from the studio. When she eventually arrived, she had still on the dress of the part she was then playing and her face was made up. I remember, she was looking dazzlingly beautiful. Throughout the recitation, she sat there restless and fidgety. At least that is the impression I got, which might be due to the fact that, that was the first time I was 'reciting' a film story to an actress! All the same, I could not fail to see that her grasp of the film medium was amazing! Hardly had I read a third of the script when she rose from the sofa and exclaimed, 'Wonderful! I will definitely work in your film. Please settle the details with Bibiji.'

That was an excellent piece of news for us, since we had hardly expected her to take on one more role. You see she was then working in about thirty films!

Both *Baazi* and *Hum Log* went on the sets simultaneously. Once its shooting started, I never once called on Guru Dutt on the *Baazi* set, nor did he ever invite me! Six months of arguing with me had left him exhausted! As for me, I felt like a mother, who having borne a baby had entrusted it to

someone else! Raj Khosla and Kuldeep Kohli, the two assistants of Guru Dutt's, used to keep me posted about the progress of *Baazi*, but their news was not too encouraging. Finally, Kuldeep told me frankly, 'The way they are tampering with your script^ you would hardly recognise it, by the time the picture is released!'

This information literally broke my heart! Although my script had envisaged only six 'song situations', Guru Dutt had apparently gone and added three more! I passed many a sleepless night fuming at the thought that my script was being cut and chopped without my knowledge! I, the writer, could not bring myself to suffer in silence the humiliation of being treated like a mere pen-pusher! I began to throw my weight about in Chetan's presence, where-by I trod on Guru Dutt's toes. A coolness crept into our relationship and we seemed to drift apart. Little did I then know that he would be no more before long!

I remember an incident which happened during the shooting of *Pinjre ke Panchhi*. It is worth narrating.

We were shooting an outdoor scene at Khandala, The shot was:

Bent on committing suicide, Meena Kumari is walking between the railway lines. I run after her to dissuade her from her foolhardy act. I save her in the nick of time by pulling her away from the track, as the train speeds past us. An acrimonious debate then starts between us. All that Salil Chaudhary wanted to film was the shot showing me running after Meena Kumari and then pulling her away from the track. Later by back projection, he could have taken the two shots of the approaching train and of our argument. As we got ready, it suddenly struck me that the Deccan Queen would pass that spot any minute. (It does not halt at Khandala,) If only the cameraman made haste and fixed all the lighting arrangements, in time to shoot the speeding train also, that way the whole scene could be filmed at one go and Salil would be spared the bother of back projection! I went to Salil and put up my plan to him. He in turn asked Meena Kumari who surprisingly agreed to it. Everyone plunged into feverish activity. As we stepped on to the track, it dawned on me, I had not yet learnt my lines by heart! But there was no time left. As I started chasing Meena Kumari, the shrill whistle of the engine was heard. The driver must have been horrified to see us right in the middle of the track since he repeatedly sounded the whistle. The train was running at top speed and it must have been within a few yards of us, when I dragged Meena Kumari away from the track. While we lay prostrate by the side of the railway line, the train went bounding towards Lonavala! The whole shot came out splendidly! "We packed up

and re-turned to our hotel. Later, as I lay in the warm water of the tub in the hotel bathroom, my whole body was aching. In a flash, I realised the enormity of my folly! If one of us had tripped and fallen down on the railway track ... When I finished my bath and came out of my room, I saw Meena Kumari, sitting on the floor of the verandah outside her room. She was holding her head between the palms of her hands. As she saw me, she said, ‘What were you up to today Balraj ji? Are you fed up with life?’

‘That’s exactly what I am asking myself! What a foolish thing to do! But I can’t understand why you did not stop me from exposing ourselves to such a danger!’

She smiled and said, ‘You were so very keen on taking that shot at one go! How could I then stop you?’

I was all at sea the day the shooting of *Hum Log* started. The fright that I had taken for the camera had by then reached truly ridiculous proportions. Indeed, things came to such a pass on that day that once during a break when I went out into the garden to take a breather, I peed in my trousers!

The first scene showed me acting opposite Anwar Hussain who was playing Kundan, the *murgichor*. Merely to look at him was enough to make me nervous. The way he was acting, one felt the role had been specially written for him. As for me, I could hardly open my mouth without putting my foot in it. Anwar Hussain was the very soul of *Hum Log*. His acting was just superlative. Since *Hum Log*, not once has a role of that calibre come his way.

That first day, Zia Sarhadi had brought me to the studio in a taxi. In the evening, too, we had returned home together. On our way to the studio, I made a clean breast of my misgivings. I said to him in all humility, ‘Look Zia, I do not think I deserve the trust and confidence you have placed in me. I shall not take it amiss, if even at this stage, you give the role to someone else. After all, you too have had to struggle to get the film, and you cannot possibly afford to take any chances with me!’

I shall never forget the answer he gave me. As he was wont to do, he nibbled at his nails for a while, and then said, ‘Balraj Sahab, there’s no turning back now. We shall either swim or sink together!’ It was the typical of the magnanimity and kindness of the man!

However, this solemn assurance of his neither bucked me up nor made me happy. On the contrary, my nervousness increased all the more at the prospect of facing the cameras the following day!

On reaching home, I literally broke down in the presence of my wife.

Like a mad man, I started pounding my head against a wall, muttering all the time, 'I can never become an actor!'

As luck would have it, while I was raving and ranting like this, we had a visitor. It was Nagarat, a nineteen-year-old lad, who was an assistant of Zia's. The moment he saw the sorry state I was in, he started haranguing me, 'You are a downright coward and a hypocrite, that's what you're! You should be ashamed to call yourself a communist. You, who do nothing but lick the shoes of the capitalists!'

I merely stood there gaping at him, too startled to say anything! 'You can't act, eh? What rubbish! Of course, you can, in fact, a hundred times better than any of them—but not as long as you let yourself be cowed down by the pomp and splendour of the rich and look at their cars with longing eyes! I know what's pinching you. You cannot stomach the fact that your colleague Anwar should be so rich and the brother of a leading star like Nargis! You are jealous of him. And yet you go about cutting a fine figure as a monopolist of all the art in the world. The bloody cheek! Let me tell you, it is not art that you care about but wealth. Money is the only thing that you really cherish and value in life! You can fool yourself but not me!'

Those words, coming as they did from a mere lad, pierced my heart like a dagger. They laid bare before my eyes the core of the role I was to play in *Hum Log*. One word kept ringing in my ears — *Nafrat*—hatred! Hatred for everything, be it man or beast! Hatred for life itself!

It was no accident that it fell to Nagarat to put his finger precisely on what was eating me up and thus understand my predicament. He had seen me play an ailing unemployed youth in the *IPTA* play *Sadak ke Kinare*. I used to deliver my lines with such gusto and vehemence that they always evoked a spontaneous response from the audience; and no wonder, since the sentiments they expressed were full of venom against the capitalist system. The entire hall would ring with a deafening applause as the curtain came down! Nagarat's homily had hit the bull's-eye, so to speak. I asked myself, 'Isn't your role in *Hum Log* an exact replica of the one you used to play with such success in that play? What then, is the sense in being a cry baby and losing your balance?'

I have always wondered at that young man's perspicacity, which so unerringly pointed out to me where I was going wrong! His words acted like a tonic on my sinking morale! They also led me to self-introspection. I now realised that it was my alter ego which was responsible for making me lose confidence. No artiste, especially one who is on the threshold of his career,

can escape a confrontation, with this demon of an alter ego whom he must over-come if he is to survive!

Sleep eluded me that night. I let my imagination run wild. I saw every human being as my 'sworn enemy' and I did not spare even my friends and colleagues! Surprisingly, as the night wore on, I found my spirits soaring. By morning I was a new man, with my self-confidence fully restored. In fact, I began impatiently to look forward to that moment when the cameras would be switched on and I would get a chance to 'cross swords' with Anwar! I now saw him as someone who like me was a victim of circumstances! It was, of course, very callous of me to take such an attitude!

Next day I rode to the studio on my motor-cycle. As Dada Paranjape, the make-up man, set about applying all kinds of paints, and lotions to my pale and none-too-attractive face to make it a little presentable, I stopped him, saying, 'I have no use for these artificial beauty aids. Let me be just myself. I want my face to look natural, exactly as it is!'

He was quite taken aback at these words. 'That won't do. I have to follow Zia Saab's instructions!' I lost my temper. Raising my voice I countered, 'Zia Saab may be the Director, but I am the hero of the film! Besides, he is my friend, so we will settle this matter between ourselves. Please do as I tell you.' Dada had to give in.

There were a number of spanking new cars parked in the studio compound. Making sure first that no one was around, I spat on a few of them. That whetted my appetite. I went round the parking lot and spat on each one of them to my heart's content. Arriving at the set, I saw Anwar there. I gave him a look of such contempt that he winced before it, "which I took as a triumph! He seemed to read the meaning of my look which conveyed the hatred I felt for him—a man who was 'living on the crumbs thrown at him by his sister!'" (Today, whenever I remember this incident, it gives me pain!) The fact is, in the film world, every man is for himself. Your colleagues are your enemies, who are all the time trying to outsmart you! All this rivalry and jealousy has created a film jargon all its own! You constantly hear phrases like, 'X has dominated Y in that film' and 'A has put B in the shade.' I kept telling myself that day, 'Let me see, who is going to dominate *me* or put me in the shade.' I was ready to take on all comers!

Surprisingly, this truculence of mine sharpened my memory. At the rehearsal I remembered all my lines, which I delivered effortlessly. Zia was so much pleased with me, he could not help embracing me. The eyes of my *guru* Nagarat, who was standing nearby, betrayed the admiration he felt for

me. Everyone on the set seemed to be imbibed with a spirit of camaraderie and the day's shooting ended on a very cordial note.

Thus it was that I became an artiste — on the strength of just one feeling, hatred for everyone! Luckily for me, the character I was portraying in that film did harbour a grudge against society, else my sullen mood would have been of no avail. More over, since it was this feeling of hatred, which had given me the much-needed courage to face the cameras, it became in my eyes a sort of a panacea, a solution to all my problems. Although whatever I was doing was against all canons of film acting, it was nevertheless the proper thing to do in the context of the role I was playing. Slowly but surely, I began to come up to Zia's expectations. Fortunately, my lines too were full of punch and poetry. I had a feeling that I had 'arrived' as an actor.

To get disheartened over a minor failure or to indulge in self-praise over an equally minor success is the distinguishing characteristic of an inexperienced artiste. I too took to bragging to my friends and colleagues the moment things began to go a little smoothly for me!

As you walk through the gates of the Ranjit Studio and enter its premises, the first thing you see is an outhouse. It was in this house that Goharbat and Seth Chandulal Shah would hold court every morning. All the leading lights, so also the smaller fry of the film industry used religiously to come here to pay their respects to the great man. Those on whom Sethji wished to bestow a special honour, would be asked to stay on for lunch. In the evenings, Sethji retired to his *pedhi* from where he operated as a stock broker. Both on the stock exchange and in films, he had won and lost literally millions.

A nawab or a maharajah could have envied the way he conducted himself and the kind of life he led. Practically every other day, you saw his photograph in the newspapers, a tall, white-haired man with a winning smile on his face, proudly holding the reins of some race horse!

Anwar Hussain used to call him affectionately 'Negative Plate'. His flamboyance had given rise to a number of apocryphal legends about him, it was rumoured, for example, that he had once young naked girls substitute for marble columns in a palace scene.

There was no doubt, however, that Sethji had a very soft corner for artistes, whom he always treated with respect. Whatever might be his assessment of my work in that film, I had excellent personal relations with him. I had, for instance, a very frank discussion with him, prior to signing the *Hum Log* contract. Zia was also present then. Sethji had said, in his

none-too-elegant Hindustani, 'Frankly, I do not think you are the right person for this role. But what can I do when the Director insists that you play it? Anyway, how much do you expect for the role?'

I answered, 'It is not for me to say how much I should be paid. I will accept whatever you give me!' 'No, no, don't stand on formalities! Now that we have signed you for the role, we want you to be happy working for us.', 'Give me then ten thousand,' I said after a little thought. Sethji smiled at me. 'Ten? We had reckoned with five. It doesn't matter, though. You shall have your ten thousand. What difference does it make, after all, whether we give you five or ten thousand rupees?' Hearing those reassuring words, I was emboldened to say, 'Sethji, whatever the amount please see that I get a fixed instalment paid to me every month. I am passing through very difficult times, what with the debts I have incurred.' 'That is no problem,' Sethji said. He summoned his manager and instructed him to pay me a sum of fifteen hundred rupees in the first week of every month.

Sethji himself was finding the going rough those days. That was why, contrary to his usual practice, he was making small-budget films. Actually none of the artistes of *Hum Log* has been paid a paisa till today. Nevertheless, as far as I was concerned, Sethji was true to his word.

Raj Kumar was still a police inspector in these days. I used to see him quite often in Sethji's Durbar. In his uniform, he cut a very fine figure. Rajendra Kumar too was wont to frequent the studio to call on Sethji. The presence of these two aspiring artistes there made me wonder whether in spite of my contract, Sethji was not having second thoughts, after all, and trying to make Zia see reason!

Once while a shot was being readied, Durga Khote took me aside and confided in me, 'The way you are delivering your lines, they are coming out flat.' That jolted me out of my complacency. I found myself losing confidence, but fortunately, it was not long before I gathered my wits about me. I realised that like Nagarat, she, too, was offering this criticism out of a genuine desire to help me become a better actor. I remembered that David, too, had once given me a few tips, which even now I was finding useful! Thanks to Durga Khote's hint, I became my own critic, in that I began to assess my work objectively, I could then see how right she was! I was indeed saying my lines in a staccato voice. It lacked those modulations which go to make the ordinary everyday human speech so natural!

I now took to meditating on my lines in the privacy of a secluded corner, before the start of each rehearsal.

Bearing in mind what David and Durga Khote had told me, I would repeat the lines to myself in a manner that articulated the sentiments hidden in them!

I had found one more way to ascertain whether or not I was sounding natural. I would ask myself: 'How would you say these lines, if you had to say them in Punjabi?' After all, Punjabi, my mother tongue, is so very akin to Hindi!

Thanks to kindness and help from Zia and my other colleagues, the quality of my work began to improve. The congenial atmosphere of the studio too made me work with a will. Moreover, one now heard nice things being said about the film. I must, however, set the record straight by saying that the film industry can be sometimes very cruel to its technicians and workers. Hence, everyone does not find the atmosphere in a studio cordial. We had, for example, an editor, whom Zia had invited to join the *Hum Log* unit. Zia had a very high opinion of his editing ability. Unfortunately, a few days after joining the unit, he lost his father. He had not a penny on him, so he approached the studio authorities for an advance to pay for the last rites of his departed father. In vain did he wait in the studio office from 10 a.m. to 4 in the afternoon, while the shooting of *Hum Log* proceeded unhampered! The shock unhinged him completely. After *Hum Log* he left the industry and took to the bottle. With no means of livelihood, he began to beg unashamedly. Taking pity on him, I used to help him occasionally but then gave it up when I saw it was doing him no good.

Once I happened to see a Mughal-style *pagdi* lying forlornly in the corner of a make-up room. Out of curiosity I enquired of Swami, our make-up man. He told me it used to be K.L. Saigal's headgear, when he was playing Shahjahan! I was saddened at this indifferent attitude of our countrymen.

What a contrast it was to the loving care with which such moments are preserved in other countries!

Swami's experience of studio life too was revealing. Being a resident of Thana, he had to catch an early morning local train to reach the studio and it used to be well past midnight when he returned home. Thus at both times, he would find his children in bed, fast asleep and in those days they had no weekly holidays. Fortunately, things have since improved with studios now remaining closed on Sundays.

Hum Log took about six months to complete. I was not quite myself on the day the 'trial' of the film was shown in the studio. I just sat there numbed, as if I had fever. I was so engrossed in assessing my own role, that

I could not make head or tail of the story. I felt, my acting was all wrong! At the end of the trial, there was a stunning silence in the auditorium which I found chilling.

As we came out, Kanhaiyalal caught me by the arm. Leading me aside, he said, 'Maar di!' I kept wondering what he meant by that.

The film was released at the newly-opened Liberty Cinema in Bombay. With no marquee names in it, it had a rather cold reception in the first few weeks. It was, therefore, all the more remarkable that eventually it caught on with a vengeance.

Indeed, the employees of Liberty Cinema became so enamoured of it, that they took to selling tickets in the by-lanes of Bombay. In Bombay, *Hum Log* came to be known as a 'communist film' and I was labelled a 'communist actor'!

A day before *Hum Log* was released; I had the privilege of being received by Seth Chandulal Shah. As I entered his chamber, he bade me sit beside him on a sofa and said to me with 'intimate kindness, 'Balraj, it is as a character actor rather than a hero that you have made your mark in the industry. This means that you will continue to get roles till your old age. A hero's film career, on the other hand, is rather short.'

Both our films and the actors have come to be typed. You have for example, social films, stunt films, heroes, character heroes, side heroes, character artistes, decent extras and what not! This makes it well nigh impossible for an actor to change his screen image.

I too did not escape being 'typed'. Moreover, my face was now familiar to the man in the street. Once at a film premiere I found myself mobbed by a bevy of young girls, who wanted my autograph. In great style I took out my fountainpen, only to find the autograph book snatched from my hand! I stood there helplessly — watching the girls run towards Raj Kapoor, whom in the meanwhile they had spotted in the crowd!

Once I ran into Hiten Chowdhary in a cafe. There was a time when as a struggling artiste, I used to see him quite often. He came to my table and said, 'Well, Balraj, how does it feel to be successful?' I couldn't think of anything to say in reply.

Six

Many interesting things came to light in the wake of *Hum Log's* success.

A Shehenshah that he was, Seth Chandulal Shah presented Zia with a brand new Hillman-minx, complete with a chauffeur. The car did wonders to Zia's already inflated ego. The man became so puffed up, he started thinking no end of himself! Our neighbourhood at Juhu was now no longer good enough for him. He shifted to a hotel in Colaba. I called on him at his hotel a couple of times, but then stopped seeing him. It was obvious to me that I was not welcome there. But by then I had learnt to take such things in my stride!

More than Chandulal Shah, however, it was the Communist Party which was responsible for building up Zia's image. He began to look upon himself as some kind of a prophet of 'socialist realism'. At Nagpada, a grand function was organised in his honour. A huge stage was erected in a maidan, with a snow-white canvas, as its backdrop. It showed two portraits — one of Comrade Stalin and the other of Comrade Zia Sarhadi! It was only later that the cat was out of the bag. Zia himself had met the expense of the whole show!

Comrade Dange occupied the place of honour on the stage. To his right sat Zia and the other stars of *Hum Log* — Nutan, Shyama, Sajjan, Durga Khote, Kanhaiyalal, Anwar Hussain and I. The left flank comprised All Sardar Jafri, Mugni Abbas, Sabir and a few other progressive writers.

The occasion no doubt demanded that Comrade Dange praise Zia Sarhadi. In the course of his speech, however, he also said a few uncharitable things about me. Turning to me, he said, 'This gentleman here used to be with us in days gone by. He has, however, parted company with us now. 'Well, it does not matter, I suppose.'

That remark made the audience a trifle restless. A few derisive whistles and cries of 'shame' 'shame' were heard. Thereupon, Comrade Dange became aware of his gaffe and immediately changed the trend of his speech. I heaved a sigh of relief and sat there with bowed head!

The entire *Hum Log* unit had worked with a fine esprit *de corps*. All of us had hoped that it would endure long enough to enable us to produce better social films than *Hum Log*. As for me, I felt as if in the *Hum Log* unit I had found a haven! True, Zia had been most helpful and cooperative, besides treating me with great respect. However, my contribution towards the writing of the *Hum Log* scenario was far more substantial than the help Zia had rendered me when I was writing the *Baazi* script.; Zia had modelled the male lead of *Hum Log* on a character from the American play, Tobacco Road-. But when it came to presenting him in an Indian garb, he found himself at a loss. It was here that my understanding of the political and

social aspects of Indian life proved very useful to him. Zia, Kishan Chopra and I had sat up once till the early hours of the morning, writing the ‘climax’ of the film, over which the fans subsequently went wild. My court speech was the highlight of the film which drew the public over and over again to the picture house. Although “The Times of India” critic—Clare—after whom the Filmfare award has been named — did hold me guilty of overacting, she nevertheless chose to call my role ‘memorable’.

For his next film *Footpath*, Zia Sarhadi had at his disposal everything that a director could ask for — artistes of the calibre of Dilip Kumar and Meena Kumari, unlimited funds and leading theoreticians of the Communist Party—Ali Sardar Jafri, Ramesh Thapar, and Gawankar amongst them—to advise him on ideological matters!

It was, therefore, all the more unfortunate that *Footpath* failed miserably. Apparently, the film was not equal to conveying the message of socialist realism. The film spelt the ruin of Seth Chandulal Shahi. He had to close down his studio, as a result of which its *mazdoors* and technicians were thrown on the streets.

Baazi in the meanwhile was scaling new heights of popularity. It proved to be a lucky film for Dev Anand, Geeta Ball, Guru Dutt, Sahir Ludhianvi and Sachin Deb Burman. Its success gave a flying start to their careers. With the film journals praising them sky-high, they started blowing their own trumpets. No wonder then that against this fanfare, the poor, unknown writer should pale into insignificance. Even today people merely try to humour me, if I tell them that I had penned the script and dialogues of *Baazi*.

Chetan Anand offered me a sum of six thousand rupees for writing the screen play and dialogues of his next film. This was nothing in comparison with the fees (up to Rs. 20,000/-) producers were now prepared to offer me, in the wake of *Hum Log*’s success. It was, therefore, rather reluctantly that I accepted Chetan’s offer.

Chetan’s offer, however, had another aspect, which in my eyes was significant. He wanted me to direct the film as well, for which the fees were to be a thousand rupees. I now realise that Chetan was then doing me a favour, since it was the role of a writer and a director rather than an actor’s which was more suited to my temperament.

As a successful director, I could have produced films according to my own likes and instead of cry-ing my heart out over the utter senselessness of our films; I would be today trying to mould them to make them more realistic. I had already achieved a measure of success as an actor and a

writer. If only I had succeeded as a director too, I would not be probably nursing today thoughts of leaving the film profession altogether!

For about three months I worked on the scenario of Chetan's film, which we decided to call *Solah Aane*. However, the lure of acting was diverting my attention from the job in hand. The film had to encounter several other impediments, as a result of which it had to be finally given up.

Interestingly, as the success of *Hum Log* receded into the background, the offers of acting roles I had been receiving dwindled too. D. D. Kashyap was the only director, who still thought me good enough to be a hero. He offered me the lead role in his film *Badnaam*, which he was making for Filmistan. Shyama was my heroine, while Sheela Ramani and Helen were making their debuts in that film.

Helen was then a fifteen-year-old girl. She used to look exactly like a beautiful doll. Having recently come from Burma with her mother, she knew no dancing. She did not understand Hindi, either. In fact, she was practically unlettered and yet despite all these handicaps, she was intelligent enough not to fall prey to the wolves of the film industry. As for her mother, she had only romantic notions about the film world, but Helen was more sensible. Before long, she parted company with her mother and threw in her lot with producer P. N. Arora, although he was old enough to be her father! Thereby she could keep those wolves at bay and devote herself to the study of dancing and acting. I have only respect and admiration for Helen. If she had let her mother turn her into a mere money-making machine, she would be in the wilderness today!

Ulhas and Murad had important roles in this film. Both were brilliant raconteurs. And as for the number of Hindi-Urdu *shers* that they knew by heart, it was simply legion. They would cast a magic spell on you, once they started talking over a glass of wine. K. N. Singh, Hamid Butt, Kameshwar Sehgal, Kanhaiyalal and Badri Prasad were also masters of the art of conversation. After listening to them, I realised that I could not really call myself a film artiste until I learned to speak Hindi as fluently and expressively as these versatile men. I have never subscribed to the theory that the voice of an actor is his most important asset. I do, however, maintain that an actor must be able to speak the language, which happens to be the vehicle of his creative expression, with the correct 'native' accent. More-over, he should be a discerning student of its literature, without which his progress as an actor will stop after he has attained a certain level. It was this conviction that had made me take infinite pains over improving my Urdu-Hindi diction, when I was on the B.B.C. True, I have had some

success, as a result of my continued study of the phonetics and literature of these two languages. Nevertheless, I am convinced that I can never hope to come anywhere near the flawless diction and the complete mastery Ulhas and Murad have over Urdu and Hindi. It is they who have induced me to take up the study of my mother tongue, Punjabi.

Those were the days of black-and-white films. The budget of such a film hardly ever exceeded Rs. 4 lakhs. Needless to say, the practice of going to Kulu, Kashmir or to London or Paris had not yet come into vogue. The hilly, wooded terrain of Ghod Bunder about twenty miles out of Bombay instead filled the bill. If a blue clear sky enlivens a scene in a colour film, it is dark clouds which put life into a black-and-white outdoor scene. All the film companies, therefore, used to head for Ghod Bunder a month before the outbreak of the monsoon, when the clouds appear in the Bombay skies. It was a favourite locale for outdoor shooting.

The *Badnaam* unit was once shooting an outdoor scene in the vicinity of Ghod Bunder. D. D. Kashyap, who, like Chetan Anand and B. R. Chopra, was among my contemporaries at Government College, Lahore, had the camera perched on top of a hillock, which overlooked a deep ravine.

‘What’s the point in, having the camera at such a dangerous spot, Kashyap Sahab?’ Murad asked him.

‘Here the hero and the villain, that is, you and Balraj Sahab, come to blows!’

‘You mean, we stand over there, right at the edge of the cliff and fight it out?’

‘That’s the idea!’

‘I see. I get the point,’ Murad said gravely. He then repaired to a spot, far away from the cliff, where Ulhas was waiting for him to join him for a little booze.

I had developed cold feet at the prospect of ‘fighting it out’ so near the cliff, but since Murad had thought nothing of it, I decided it wasn’t all that dangerous, after all. I got ready for the shot, make-up and all.

When Kashyap saw that I was ready, he shouted across the terrain,

‘Murad sahab! We are waiting for you to get ready!’

Murad at first acted as if he had not heard Kashyap. When he finally walked across to where we were standing, he was unsteady on his feet.

‘You said something, Kashyap Sahab?’

‘I did, indeed. The shot is ready.’

‘Shot? What shot?’

‘The one, where you and Balraj sahab have to fight!’

‘Oh yes, you mean that fight! But what kind of fight do you have in mind,. Kashyap Sahab? There are .so many different ways one can fight in.’

‘Just a little mock—fight will do. The sort you see in films.’ Kashyap answered smilingly.

‘I get you now. That’s no problem. But you see, I can hardly stand on my legs, let alone give some-one a thrashing,’ so saying he walked away to join his friend. I stood there trying to suppress a laugh. Thanks to this tact of Murad’s, we got out of the dangerous predicament without much ado.

While the shooting of *Badnaam* was still in pro-gress, I happened to read *Modern Acting*, a book analysing the technique of Clark Gable. It was written by his wife. I must say the book did me much harm. Its thesis influenced me so much that I started aping Clark Gable. In trying to smile *a la* Gable, when before the camera, I only made myself ridiculous. In assessing my role in *Badnaam*, Clare had written, ‘The face of a corpse might have looked more lively than Balraj Sahni’s!’

With the release of *Badnaam*, I once again hit the nadir of my career! Its failure broke my heart!

Seven

It was a pleasant morning, and I had brought my children to the beach. I was showing them how to build sand castles, when I saw a rotund dhoti-clad Ben-gali Babu approach me, I had no idea who he was. (He was Asit Sen, who in those days was Assistant Director to Bimal Roy.) Later he became famous as a comedian of Hindi films.

The stranger walked right up to where I was squatting on the sand and addressed me in his nasal and melancholy voice:

‘Bimal Roy Dada has been remembering you. He wants to discuss with you something about a film.’

The great Bimal Roy remembering me and want-ing to discuss with me about a film? I could not bring myself to believe it! True, he had visited the set of *Hum Log* once. I was doing then a love scene with Shyama. I remember, I had stood there be-fore the camera, ill at ease, while Shyama was neck-ing me without the slightest embarrassment. Bimal Roy had seen

my amateurish acting that day. It was, therefore, all the more difficult to believe that a director of his eminence should want to give me a role in his film!

All the same, I presented myself at the Mohan Studio post-haste. For the great occasion, I had on my London-made suit, which by standards of those days was quite expensive. On my face, I had put a thin layer of powder.

I found Bimal Roy at his desk, writing something, when I entered his cabin. As he stopped writing and looked up, he appeared to be taken aback. He fixed me with a steady gaze and kept staring at me in silence. I felt as if I had committed a *faux pas*! After a while, he turned to the people seated at the rear end of the cabin and said to them in Bengali: 'Is this the man you had in mind? What sort of a joke you are playing on me?' Apparently, he wasn't aware that I knew Bengali. Without even offering me a seat, he said to me, 'Mr. Sahni, my men have made a mistake. I can see that you are totally unsuited to play the sort of role I wish to present in my film.'

I found the matter-of-fact way, in which he uttered those words, chilling. Dignity demanded that I leave the place forthwith. But I stood there rooted to the floor. I was not prepared to see my hopes shattered just like that — hopes, which only a short while ago had soared sky-high! I cleared my throat and managed to mutter, 'What is the role like?' 'An uncouth villager's,' he answered a shade mockingly.

Once again, I was gripped by an uncontrollable urge to turn round and walk out of the room. My legs, however, refused to move. It was as if some unknown power was warning them not to move, since such an opportunity would not come again! The same unknown power made me say,"

'I have already played such a role before.' 'Where?'

'In the film *Dharti ke Lal*, which -was made by the People's Theatre.¹ The expression on Bimal Roy's face changed. His colleagues too appeared to heave a sigh of relief. It was then that I noticed Salil Chowdhary in that group. He himself was a member of IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) Unit and I had met him before on one or two occasions. Perhaps it was he who had recommended me to Bimal Roy!

'What role did you play in *Dharti ke Lal*?' Bimal Roy asked me.

'Niranjan's, the Prime Minister's son's. Shombhu Mitra was the Co-Director of the film. He had help-ed me a lot then.'

Bimal Roy pointed to a chair and said, '*Bosho!*' (Sit down). More than the mention of *Dharti ke Lal*, it was the magic name of Shombhu Mitra, which

did the trick. I had a feeling I had come up to the high expectations of Bimal Roy, the Director, and I wasn't wrong there. I got the role.

Hrishikesh Mukherji took me out into the studio-garden. We sat on a cement bench there, while he narrated to me the story of the film. Listening to it, I could hardly contain my tears. He himself, too, was in no better condition.

Jogeshwari is a sprawling suburb of Bombay, a few miles outside the city. It is the home of *Bhayyas* from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, whose main occupation is tending herds of buffaloes, which they maintain there. From the day following my Interview with Bimal Roy, I took to visiting their *bustees*. I would go there and watch them minutely — their way of working, the way they walked, squatted on the ground to eat, their accent, their dress, everything! I would make a mental note of all the traits and peculiarities of those people and try to imagine myself as one of them. I noticed that they were very fond of wearing turbans and that each had a way, all his own, of tying it. I bought myself one and started practising the ritual of tying it, the way they did. But I could never achieve their perfection. This was one knotty problem, which I had to solve as best I could. Whatever success I could make of my role in *Do Bigha Zamin* is thus the result of this study I had made of the way of life of the *Bhayyas*.

Came the first day of shooting. All the nervous-ness and diffidence, which I used to suffer from on such occasions in the past, was gone. The thought that I was going to enact a role after my heart gave me confidence. On reaching the studio, I requested Bimal Roy to let me do my own make-up and choose the dress I was going to wear for the role. He agreed. Some time later when he saw me transformed into 'Shambhu Mahato walk with the gait of a peasant — the very antithesis of that 'well-dressed gentleman', who only a few days ago had called at his office, hoping to get the role — he looked genuinely pleased. Bimal Da was not given to expressing his pleasure in, so many words. All that happened on such occasions was that his round, fair face lost some of its cold impassivity.

There was indeed a good deal of artistry and meticulousness in Bimal Roy's direction, without however any of Barua's harshness. The first shot showed me entering the zamindar's drawing-room. When we were rehearsing the scene, Bimal Roy had instructed me to wipe my feet on the doormat, before I stepped in. This realistic touch of his must have stirred several other facets of my imagination for I did not merely wipe my feet; I also showed the terror that would grip an ignorant peasant at the prospect of coming face to face with a *zamindar*! The approval with which he watched

me play that scene — I shied away from entering the room—was all too apparent to me. A new sense of camaraderie began to develop between the two of us.

Murad was playing the *zamindar's* role. On several occasions during the filming of that scene, particularly when the camera was being trained on my face for a close-up, I became aware of my shortcomings. My face then became immobile. I would find myself unable adequately to express the sentiments I felt deep in my heart. The atmosphere of the studio was, however, to my liking — calm and peaceful. This was something I had missed in those other studios, where shooting was accompanied by a lot of vulgarity and drunkenness, which used to make me feel dispirited.

In the last shot, I had to sit on my haunches and seize the *zamindar's* feet in supplication, and implore him not to deprive me of my land. Before the 'take', Bimal Roy had secretly told Murad to jerk his feet free of my grip, and then remove himself from the range of the camera — a fact I did not know. As luck would have it, in the process, his foot landed smack on my face with a sickening thud! That no doubt lent the shot an excellent effect, but I felt deeply insulted and hurt. Tears of anger welled in my eyes. Long after the 'cut', I lay there on the carpet, sobbing!... Murad came running. Taking me in his arms, he apologized to me and told me what had transpired between him and Bimal Roy. The incident made Bimal Da rise in my esteem, all the more!

I was on trial, so to speak, during those early days of shooting, since some of the leading stars such as Ashok Kumar, Jairaj and Bharat Bhushan had tried their best to get the role. I was also given to understand that, notwithstanding the contract, I could be given the sack any day. I felt, however, confident enough to take all that in my stride.

It was on the sets of *Do Bigha Zamin* that I met Nirupa Roy for the first time. In my estimation, she was already a great star (Actually, she was new to films, having just started her career). I, therefore, thought she was pulling my leg when she told me how pleased she was to work with me!

A lot of care and research had gone into the selection of Nirupa Roy as the female lead. She was, after all, herself a farmer's daughter. Indeed till about two years ago, she had been actually leading the kind of life she had to portray on the screen. She was thus native to the rural milieu, whereas it was through study and observation that I was trying to become a *kisan*! It is, therefore, Nirupa who must get the major credit for giving the film that realistic touch, which the viewers had felt and appreciated so much, without,

however, being aware of the factors that had made it possible. Eventually, we made such an impact as a husband-and-wife team, that we have played similar roles on the screen on several occasions since then.

For two or three months, the shooting went on without a hitch. But then I had a problem. As for the way he dresses and walks, I could simulate a peasant effortlessly. But talking with a 'chaste' rustic accent presented difficulty. I knew that the dialogue had to be delivered without the slightest artificiality. I reckoned that even if I could manage that, that in itself would be some achievement! Whenever I was in a fix, I would imitate Dilip Kumar. However, in spite of my best efforts, Paul Mahendra, the film's Director of Dialogue, wasn't too pleased - with me. Being a product of the New Theatres School, its influence was much in evidence in his direction, while I on my part was of the view that the New Theatres School of acting was out-moded. Indeed, it was never fully spontaneous and natural, but merely made a pretence of being so. Be that as it may, Paul Mahendra began remonstrating with me in private. He was afraid that I would ultimately bring about the downfall of the film!

Heaven knows, who else was sharing these misgivings about my style of acting and was worried about the imminent failure of the film! In my heart of hearts, though, I felt sure, I was going in the right direction. After all, Bimal Roy, to whom I had surrendered myself completely, appeared satisfied with whatever I was doing!

The next stage in the film was shooting 'outdoors' in Calcutta, where I was to pull a rickshaw. Accompanied by my wife, I arrived there a few days in advance of the other members of the unit. We made the journey by rail in a third class compartment, since I wanted to observe the behaviour of villagers while travelling—how they get into and off the train, how they sit, etc. This was in preparation for a scene which was to be filmed later. I was determined to see that my peasant looked fully authentic.

On reaching Calcutta, I went to the office of the Rickshawallas' Union. One of its members taught me, within a day, all the tricks of pulling a rickshaw. True, it is easier to pull a hand-rickshaw manually than to pedal away at a cycle-rickshaw; but the former involves such a lot of physical effort, that it leaves you completely exhausted. Every muscle in your body aches and you feel as if all your bones would crack. Moreover, you have to be extra vigilant on Calcutta's busy roads, where the vehicular traffic moves at a terrific speed.

On the eve of the shooting, I took my wife to see the Shishir Bhaduri play *Chandragupta*. In the world of theatre, the late Shishir Bhaduri occupies the same exalted position which Rabindranath Tagore does in the world of letters. In Europe and America, too, his acting talent has won acclaim.

Seeing him act in that easy and natural manner, which was the hallmark of that great actor, I felt myself sinking into despondency. My self-confidence, which I had built up so painstakingly, started giving way to a sense of diffidence. I did all I could to bolster it up, but to no avail! On the contrary, I became obsessed with the thought that I did not know even the rudiments of acting. I spent a sleepless night.

Next day, the outdoor shooting started in the vicinity of the Victoria Memorial. Within a matter of minutes, all that old nervousness of my *Hum Log* days came over me. I kept forgetting my lines. I had an uneasy feeling that my acting was all wrong. In desperation, I tried to act like Dilip Kumar, but then I saw before my eyes the person of Shishir Bhaduri! Falling between two stools, I felt terribly confused and bewildered!

Bimal Roy looked annoyed. 'What's wrong with you? Aren't you feeling well?' he asked me. I said, 'I am feeling rather listless. I couldn't sleep last night.'

But he didn't seem convinced. He had probably guessed the real cause for my feeling out of sorts. Apparently fed up with me, he went away to Chowringhee to take some shots there. I was left alone with a splitting headache. As I sat there in my rickshaw, forlorn and dejected, a middle-aged *ricksha-wallah* approached me. He had been watching our tamasha from a distance. Except for his poor health, he might have been one of those Jogeshwari *Bhayyas*. His sickly, pockmarked face showed a greyish growth of several days, and he had yellow protruding teeth. He wanted to know what all the fuss was about. I told him we were shooting a film.

'You acting in that film?'

'Yes.'

'As what?'

I felt, if I talked to the fellow, it would distract my mind and help me come out of my gloomy mood. I began telling him the story of the film, the way Hrishikesh Mukherji had told me earlier. It was now his turn to be reduced to tears. His tears were, however, more 'genuine' than mine, in that it was his own life-story he was listening to! He too had *do bigha zamin* in a Bihar village, which had lain mortgaged to a *zamindar* for fifteen years. All those years, he had been pulling a rickshaw in the streets of Calcutta,

looking forward to the day when he would save enough money to get his land back. But now he had given up all hope of ever seeing his land again. After having recounted to me these details of his life, he sighed deeply and, as he walked away, said, ‘Yeh to *meri kahani hai babu, yeh to meri kahani hai!* Those simple words touched a cord deep inside me. The theory of acting be damned and to hell with Sisir Bhaduri and Dilip Kumar. The very peasant down-and-out, miserable and meek, whose life I was supposed to portray on the screen had appeared from nowhere, and stood before me in flesh and blood. This was a chance of a life-time, for which I should thank my stars. In a flash, I saw this role as a challenge to my acting ability, a responsibility which I had to fulfil by exerting myself to the utmost. Come what may, I must not shirk it. That would be only cowardice, a sin, I told myself.

I simply stopped thinking about the academic theories of acting. Instead, I entered into the soul of that middle-aged *rickshaw-wallah*, which was why I was so eminently successful in playing that role. I do not think any book on acting could have taught me what that unlettered villager did! I learned a lesson that day. It is only a character, straight out of raw life, which can serve as a model for an actor, if he is to achieve any success in his career!

In his review of *Do Bigha Zamin*, the critic of ‘the Amrit Bazar Patrika’ had observed, ‘There is a touch of genius in Balraj Sahni’s acting.’ I owe this ‘touch’ to that middle-aged *rickshaw-wallah*.

And a Russian film producer had this to say about my acting in that film: ‘Balraj Sahni’s face has the imprint of life itself. It was, of course, the life of that *rickshaw-wallah*. And it has not changed one whit even after twenty-five years of independence! What a crying shame!

During the location shooting at Calcutta, several other incidents occurred which considerably enriched my life, and the memory of which I cherish to this day!

As you cross Howrah Bridge to go to the city, you arrive at an enormous square, from which radiate several thoroughfares. Since the square encompasses an immense cement-built area, it serves as an ideal haven for the homeless poor, whom you find there lolling about at all hours of the day or night.

Bimal Roy had the camera perched on top of the tall traffic control cabin, from where one had a panoramic view of the entire square.

My instructions were that as soon as I received the signal, I was to come bounding from the direction of the bridge—a villager terrified at the hurry

and noise of the big city—and mingle with the impoverished mass of humanity in that square, where I knew I could have found any number of Shambhus! It was a very important shot of the film.

Although I was supposed to be only play-acting, I did, in fact, get frightened of the milling crowds there. Hardly had I reached the foot of the bridge, when, a tram came tearing down one of the streets that converge on that square! I just about managed to save myself from being crushed under its wheels, by jumping clear of the rails, in the nick of time. In my hurry, however, the lower end of the stick I was carrying hit a cement column, and I fell down heavily on the road, in full view of those wretched paupers!

My ‘son’ (Ratan Kumar), who was clutching at my little finger; also fell down with me. The bundle of clothes which was tied to the other end of the stick flew away and landed at some distance. In the meanwhile, the driver had stopped his-tram and, having got out, was hurling at me the choicest swear words! I was under the impression that the camera was still on. Thinking, therefore, that my ‘fall’ must have made the shot very life-like, I picked up the lad and, dragging him by the hand, ran ahead, leaving the stick and the bundle of clothes lying there on the road! Surprisingly—or perhaps it was natural—these travails of mine affected all those hapless, people quite uniquely. Obviously, I had reminded them of that distant day when they too had trekked to the city, full of hope! Before I knew what was happening, I found myself surrounded by scores of men. They made me squat on the kerb and started consoling me, while the women fussed over the boy. ‘Come on now! Don’t get all that panicky! Leave everything to us. We shall help you!’ one of them was telling me, as he put a glass of water to my lips!

My eyes were, however, all the while glued to the camera. I got up and pleaded with them.

For heaven’s sake, let me go. I have work to do! I feel all right now!’

But they would not believe me. On the contrary, they became all the more convinced that I was too agitated and nervous to know what I was doing. To those poorest of the poor, it was unthinkable that a man in his senses should have forgotten to pick up his bundle of clothes.

A woman shouted at me, ‘You want to kill this child?’

I was now really in a fix, with two or three fellows holding me tightly by the arm. I was totally unaware of the fact that the shot had long since been ‘cut’ and, that Bimal Roy, Hrishikesh Mukherji and my other colleagues were in the crowd of people surrounding me! At last, Hrishikesh came to my rescue. Emerging from the crowd, he told ‘my well-wishers’ that I wasn’t

really poor but^ only playing a poor man's role in the film that was being shot there!

The moment they heard this, all that sympathy and pity they had felt for me vanished, I had played on them a cruel joke, more cruel than the one fate was playing on them every day of their hopeless lives! This they could never forgive me! To this day I have not forgotten the look of hatred that came into theft-eyes, when they realised that I was not one of them! I have always felt that it was on one of the women in that crowd that the *malkin* of the slums in *Do Bigha Zamin* was modelled. However, now that Bimal Roy is no more, there is no way of getting my sur-mise confirmed.

All through the day, Bimal Roy and Hrishikesh Mukherji used to shoot, while during the night they would roam the streets in search of new 'locations'. In Calcutta, they wash the streets in the small hours of the morning. Bimal Da wanted to capture that at-mosphere in the film, so he made me drive a rickshaw once, as early as 3 in the morning. By the time the scene was shot to his satisfaction, I had been pulling the thing for ages! I was exhausted and famished. On seeing a *halwai* selling piping hot milk outside a *bustee*, I went to him and asked for half a *seer* of milk. The man had one look at me and told me to go to hell! I persisted, 'Here, take this money. I don't want your milk gratis.'

But that made him all the more angry. I walked away milkless!

This time we were shooting during the day. It was past twelve o'clock and the heat was enough to choke a man. The camera was mounted on a truck, whose every available space was occupied by the members of the unit. As soon as a handkerchief was waved at me, I would start pulling my rickshaw. I would take a passenger, or bring one to his destination. Sometimes, it was more than one. My throat was parched. I would have given anything in the world for a glass of ice-cold water. But in the midst of traffic, there was nowhere where they could have parked the truck. Fortunately — so I thought — I saw a wayside tea-stall, presided over by a Punjabi sardar. I 'parked' my 'vehicle' at the kerb and ran to ^ him. 'Give me a glass of water, please!' I begged of him in Punjabi. 'I am dying of thirst!'

'You son of a ... Go get lost!' was what I got in-stead of a glass of water.

He probably couldn't stomach the fact that a fellow Punjabi should take to rickshaw-pulling for a living'

I felt like revealing my true identity to him and telling him a few home truths so that I could be quits with him, but there was no time for that, with the shooting held up!

Once during a break, I went to a *paanshop* and asked the *Paanwalla* for a packet of Gold Flakes, as I handed him a five-rupee note. For a full minute, the man regarded my bedraggled appearance with suspicion, then studied both sides of the note carefully. Next, he held it up against the light. Finally, after having satisfied himself that it was no counterfeit note, he parted with the packet of cigarettes. I felt like a petty thief, standing there, while the fellow subjected me and my note to this scrutiny!

On one occasion, no sooner did we start shooting at Chowringhee than a huge crowd collected there. Bimal Roy, therefore, suggested that Nirupa and I go and rest for a while in some nearby hotel. We went to 'Firpos', only to be thrown out by the waiters!

We never tire of shouting ourselves hoarse about the greatness of Indian culture and we go into raptures over its humane aspects. How hollow the claim is was brought home to me during the shooting of *Do Bigha Zamin*. After what I saw and experienced as Shambhu Mahato, I became convinced that we Indians never respect a man as a fellow human being. Money is the only thing we value above everything else in life. Indeed, it is a special characteristic of our country that a poor man may be turned away from a shop even if he should have money to buy things!

All my experiences as Shambhu Mahato were, however, not bitter. There were some which I enjoyed too.

The day they filmed me racing with a 'victoria', I was ready to drop down with exhaustion. It was a hellish ordeal to run barefoot in the fierce midday sun on roads, whose tar had begun to melt. All that running had caused blisters on the soles of my feet, which made any movement awfully painful. Whenever I begged him to stop the shooting for the day, Bimal Roy would say, 'Just two more shots and then we shall pack up.' This typical answer must have no doubt accentuated the expression of misery and pain on my face, which he probably wanted to capture on the celluloid. Anyway, the shooting dragged into eternity that day till finally I could hold out no more. Driven beyond endurance, I could not help telling him, 'Look, I am not going to run a yard more, unless you keep two bottles of beer dangling before my eyes.'

Bimal Roy promised me that as soon as the shot was over, Asit Sen would take me to 'Firpos'. There I could swill myself with beer to my heart's content! Having thus 'bribed' me, he went and filmed a couple of shots more.

At long last, the cameras stopped whirring for the day. We rushed to 'Firpos,' I and Asit Sen, only to be told that it was a 'dry' day. As soon as we emerged from the hotel, I grabbed Asit by the neck and hissed into his ears, 'Look friend, I will give you exactly ten minutes to get me a barrel of beer. Else, I'll strangle you to death with my bare hands!'

After hours of roaming about the town, Asit did after all manage to procure a couple of bottles of beer, but by that time I had lost all thirst for beer. I now wanted brandy! I told my companion, 'I won't touch this stuff now. Go get me brandy!'

That was the last straw. As it was, the fellow had been harassed enough. He flew into a rage and we had a row, good and proper. He put his foot down, insisting that his 'brief was to get me beer, so beer it would be, no matter how cheap brandy could be had! The gruelling routine of the day had left me dead tired. I, therefore, gave in and drank; I don't know how many glasses of beer. Far from giving me any relief, the ice-cold beverage, drunk on an empty stomach, only gave me a nasty cold.

Eight

I shall always look upon my role in *Do Bigha Zamin* with a sense of pride. Indeed, I shall cherish the memory of that role till I breathe my last.

After having made this confession, I become entitled to air my views on a few points of a technical nature. The film was based on Rabindranath Tagore's well-known poem of the same name, and yet nowhere has Bimal Roy expressed his gratitude to the poet. I feel that in the name of justice and fairplay, such an acknowledgement was called for.

There are two flaws in the male lead's character, which considerably detract from the force of his personality. One: He is never shown to stand up to the injustice and oppression he is subjected to; and Two: He shuns the company of friends and colleagues. The average viewer always imagines himself in the hero's shoes. Who would, however, want to identify himself with such a self-effacing and introvert hero? He is more likely to be pitied than looked up to! This was why, amongst the masses, *Do Bigha Zamin* did not enjoy the kind of popularity which it did amongst the intelligentsia.

To a certain extent, all our progressive art and literature suffers from this blemish. It is the foreign values and isms which we try to live up to, rather than those which are native to Indian soil. The technique of *Do Bigha Zamin* too was much influenced by the world-famous Italian director's film,

Bicycle *Thief* and the realism it projected. Moreover, the Indian film's songs had the imprint of Russian airs.

It is perhaps for these reasons that while the Russians said nice things about *Do Bigha Zamin*, all their acclaim was reserved for Raj Kapoor's *Awara*. In-deed, they went into raptures over *Awara*. After its release in Russia, millions of workers and peasants were found humming the tune *awara hun* in factories and farms.

In fact, in mass appeal and popularity, Raj Kapoor outdid even their own actors! Our delegation hadn't bargained for this phenomenon when it visited Russia. We had expected the citizens of this mecca of socialism to be discerning enough to appreciate art of a much higher level of sophistication. However, the Russians cannot be blamed for enthusing over *Awara*, when it is seen that the film personified the dynamism of Indian life. In this context, it is significant to note that an Englishman will always prefer to deal with an Indian who has no more than just a smattering of the English language!

If the release of *Do Bigha -Zamin*—which was accompanied by much fanfare—had not been preceded by an elaborate publicity campaign, the film might have proved a flop in India, and that would not have surprised anyone. Earlier, both *Dharti ke Lal* and *Neecha Nagar* had failed at the box office. No wonder then, that Bimal Roy never again ventured to make a film like *Do Bigha Zamin*.

The rights for releasing the film abroad were vested in Rajvansh Khanna and his two partners, Rajender Singh Hoda and Gurmukh Singh. While at the 'varsity, they had led student movements. Moreover, they were progressive in outlook. Determined to see that the film was a success, they had it released with great élan at Bombay's Metro Cinema. Thanks" to the untiring efforts of these three men, the film received wide publicity in Russia, China, France, Switzerland and several other countries.

Deoki Bose, Barua and Shantaram too had in their time enjoyed the kind of adulation which now Bimal Roy did, following the release of his two films, *Do Bigha Zamin* and *Parineeta*. Like them, Bimal Roy also could not take all the success in his stride and retain his composure. He too could not free himself from the clutches of wealthy distributors and financiers of films, well-known stars and the like. Consequently, he began making compromises, when it came to expressing any progressive views.

As if this was not enough, he took to cornering the publicity which was rightly due to his colleagues. Inevitably, therefore, well-meaning and talented artistes left him and he found himself surrounded by people who

were at best stupid sycophants! Day by day technique began gaining the upper hand at the cost of art. Moreover, it was Satyajit Ray rather than Bimal Roy whom foreign critics came to regard now as the spokesman of Indian Cinema.

Being essentially a creative artiste, Bimal Roy had no business acumen. His expenses went on mounting inexorably and eventually he found himself trapped in the sort of deals, from which there was no escape. All this took a heavy toll of his health, which ultimately led to his premature death at the age of fifty-five. In his death, the film industry suffered an irreparable loss. He left behind a void which has not been filled to this day. Rarely does one come across a film-maker of his outstanding calibre!

Do Bigha Zamin gave me too a good deal of fame and publicity. All of a sudden people woke up to the fact that I had been a professor at Shantiniketan and an announcer on the B.B.C. A few wise men even went to the extent of decking me in revolution-ary plumage. They put about that I was out to lead the Indian Cinema on a revolutionary path! They hailed me as an actor, who chose to work only in those films which championed the cause of the toil-ing masses. 'Look,' they said, 'here is a millionaire's son, who has taken to acting, not for making money but out of sympathy for the poor.' Interestingly enough, I began modelling myself on this image of mine, built up by the press!

The truth is, as in the case of the earlier *Hum Log*, *Do Bigha Zamin* too did not exactly improve my financial position. I remained as 'broke' as ever.

I was jobless for the following six months. Whenever I went to a studio in search of work, I would be subjected to curious stares. Thanks to the dysentery I had contracted in jail, my health had already deteriorated; it now became worse as a result of sitting idle at home. To add to my woes, I fell victim to eczema also. I would get nervous at the thought that it was perhaps the epithet 'communist' which was tagged on to my name, that was scaring the pro-ducers! At long last, I managed to get a role in a film. It was called *Baju Bandh*, which Ramanand Sagar was making. Though it was the lead role I was going to play, it called for a lot of villainy. I was supposed to play a waster, excessively fond of wine and women, who neglects his pious wife and becomes her despair.

One day Bimal Roy walked on to the set unannounced, as he had once done while I was on the *Hum Log* set. The *Baju Bandh* set showed a prostitute's house, where I, in my cups, was watching a dance of a nautch girl. When I saw Bimal Da there, I felt flustered. He came over to me and

whispered into my ears, ‘That’s a fine role indeed you have chosen, after *Do Bigha Zamin!*’

I was nonplussed and tongue-tied. I also could not help feeling bitter. After all, it is the easiest thing in the world to criticise others. Every man expects the other fellow to make sacrifices! It was with great difficulty that I was able to get work again and earn my bread-and-butter. At that moment *Baju Bandh* was in my eyes worth much more than *Do Bigha Zamin*, It was *Baju Bandh* which was enabling me to feed my children. Was it then fair for Bimal Da to comment so sarcastically on my role?

Or was it perhaps, that he had not meant to riddle me? It was probable that in his view he, the maker of *Do Bigha Zamin*, had become the harbinger of revolution! A decade ago, Hemen -Gupta had made a film, based on Bankim Chandra’s novel *Anand Math*, which dealt with the activities of revolutionaries. Hemen Gupta himself had been an armed revolutionary in the heyday of the British Raj. Before coming to Bombay, he had made classics like *1942* and *Bhuli Nai*.

Hemen Gupta had shot *Anand Math* as if it was some kind of a revolutionary *maha-yagna*. He appeared to be reliving the days of his revolutionary past, by making his artistes take all manner of risks. While the big stars had refused to expose themselves to any danger, the minor artistes and extras were having to acquiesce in Hemen Gupta’s directives. He had become virtually a Napoleon, who expected his soldiers to face bullets with a smile on their lips! Indeed, a couple of extras had lost their lives in the bargain! I wondered whether I too had not become a ‘sacrificial goat in the eyes of Bimal Roy, following my role in *Do Bigha Zamin*. The country had already hailed him as the *guru* of realistic cinema. What right then had I to keep myself aloof from him?

Words inflict a wound which takes a long time to heal. Although Bimal Da had possibly uttered the remark in all innocence, I could not bring myself to forgive him. I was too highly strung in those days to be capable of doing that. After having been disowned by IPTA and the Communist Party, my life had become a rudderless ship. As if this was not enough, I was having to put up with threats from the police. They were even trying to make me their informer! What with friends and colleagues finding fault with everything that I undertook, life had become unbearable for me.

Just before Bimal Roy arrived at the *Baju Bandh* set, Anwar Hussain had been regaling us with some choice stories from the film world. To this day, I remember one of them. A famous producer-director had signed Meena

Kumari for a role in one of his films.. On the very first day of the shooting, while the two of them were at the lunch table, the fellow slyly put his foot on Meena Kumari's (The producer-directors consider it their right to resort to such ruses. It is an open secret in the industry that hardly any girl can hope to become a heroine unless she acquiesces to the most vulgar demands of one of these men. Many girls have ruined their lives by putting their faith blindly in some producer's promises). Even in these days, Meena Kumari was no ordinary actress. She took the producer's prank as an insult and told him to behave himself. By way of taking revenge, the man included in his film a scene, where the hero had to slap the heroine's face. In all, thirty-one 'retakes' were done of that scene. The hero, too, was no mean actor. He was a front-rank star, whose very sight used to send young girls swooning with desire. He had known all along why so many 'retakes' were being taken, and yet he didn't bat an eyelid while delivering those thirty-one slaps! Not once did Meena Kumari utter a word, during the unending retakes. After the shot, she went to her make-up room and cried her heart out!

I remember my meeting with Baba Gurmukh Singh at the Communist Party Office in Bombay. Baba had just been released from prison after serving a life term. On seeing me, he exclaimed:- 'Oh Balraj! You a Punjabi! Why don't you go to Punjab? What makes you stay here in Bombay?' I had laughed off his suggestion then. But when I became the General Secretary, of the Bombay Unit of IPTA, I asked my-self, 'Why did you leave Punjab to come to this faceless city? Why not run away from here and live amongst your own people who speak your language?' But then I heard another voice admonishing me, 'What will you do in Punjab? Conditions would be much worse there than they are here. Your own brother Bhishma is having to move from place to place in search of a settled life. Your own colleagues, Bajvansh Khanna, Rajerider Singh Bedi and Sahir Ludhianvi have come to Bombay to earn a living. You yourself have by no means achieved much in life so far,'

That settled the question for me. I told myself, 'Come what may, you must first become financially independent. This you can achieve only by striving to raise the standard of your work. Whether your heart is in the world of films or not, you must see that you succeed in your profession. Any thought of returning to Punjab would only mean an admission of defeat.'

I am unable to say how genuine those thoughts of mine were. Nevertheless, things began to improve thereafter: The Communist Party gave up 'its anti-Nehru line. The stigma of 'traitor' smeared on the face of a coinmunjat like me was obliterated. About the same time several film

contracts came my way, one after another- *Aulad*, *Taksal*, *Aakash*, *Rahi*. That meant I could take things easy for the next couple of years. I could lead a life of my own and strive to improve the working of the film industry. But I proved to be lacking in courage. I was 'destined to make a compromise with my soul, once I achieved success in life. Bimal Da was, after all, justified in mocking at me; only he was a little ahead of the times.

I have greatly enjoyed reading Charlie Chaplin's auto-biography. I felt, as long as that versatile artiste is describing the days of his poverty and struggle, the story of his life remains gripping. The moment, however, he starts dwelling on the palmy days of his career, the story loses its charm. You have then the impression that Chaplin is far too wrapped up in his personal problems and in cultivating the friendship of the British nobility. That detracts from the purity of his soul, so to say, although he had then reached the pinnacle of his career as a creative artiste. Witness the great films he produced in those days— *Goldrush*, *Modern Times*, *Great Dictator* and *'Monsieur Virdue*. It is a strange paradox indeed!

But I am being presumptuous in comparing my-self with the great Charlie Chaplin. I do, however, maintain that an artiste's life is full of paradoxes and incongruities. The very limitations and weaknesses of his life often go to advance his artistic career.

When I look back upon my film life, I cannot fail to notice the ups and downs it has gone through,-In the first ten years, I acted in only ten films. But in the next eighteen years, which have been years of success, I have acted in more than a hundred films. The ship has now weathered the storm and is sailing in placid waters. Why would any man bother his head about mundane things when producers are smothering him with currency notes?

End